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THE  
TOWER OF TADDEO

BY

OUIDA, *pseud*

AUTHOR OF 'UNDER TWO FLAGS,' ETC.

*de la Revue de la Presse*

IN THREE VOLUMES

VOL. I.



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# THE TOWER OF TADDEO

## CHAPTER I.

IT was a high square tower, brown and gray, standing in a narrow street; one of the oldest of the once numerous towers of Florence. It was of great height, and dark with age, and rose above the lofty houses which surrounded it; its machicolated roofs and its iron vane and wooden flagstaff looked black against the sky. But warlike, and stalwart, and austere as it was, it had been given both grace and poetry by its builders, who

had belonged to that age in which men knew so well how to unite the useful and the beautiful, how to harmonize the lovely with the formidable, and how to use the sports of peace to hide the strength of war. For it had been built by the great builder of its neighbour, the Jeweller's Bridge, and it was called now, as it had been called in the days of its rising, the Tower of Taddeo.

Tradition indicated it also as at one time his residence, but this rested only on rumour; that he had been its architect the archives of the city proved beyond any doubt. He had built it as he built and painted so much else that was beautiful. Beauty in those days was necessary as air to those men, so much greater in every art than are the men of

these days ; and the makers of all these mighty mediæval streets of Italy loved to decorate them with marble and majolica and terra-cotta, and to put niches in them for Madonna's shrines and statues of the saints, and allegorical devices, and inscriptions in the Latin tongue and iron scrollwork made by hand into the utmost delicacy of flower and foliage.

This tower was rich in all such . decoration, and was sometimes called as well the House of the Loves (*Casa degli Amorini*), from the winged children, by Luca delle Robbia, which clustered together over its archway, and held aloft the shield of the great family for whom it had been built, a Tuscan branch of those Brancalone who once were lords of Cesena and Imola.

Above their shield was a shrine, with the Virgin and Child seated beneath a canopy, which had, it was said, wrought a miracle in the plague, and a framework of white and green lilies was around them. Above these were other winged children, and other garlands of lilies, and above these, again, was the figure of a bishop with a lamb at his feet; and all this ornament went upward, upward, upward, until figures and flowers mounted as high as the lines of the battlements, and were full of bright colour, and wholly unspoiled, although four centuries, if one, had gone by since they had been placed there to brighten the dark and gruesome walls, which were pierced with ogive windows and kneeling windows, barred with iron

gratings, while below these were iron rings for torches, and iron sconces for lamps, and one massive oaken iron-studded door.

A narrow and dark staircase of stone, very steep, went from top to bottom of the tower; half its lower chambers served as a store place for oils, cheeses, and pastes to a chandler; and a seller of fuel had the other half filled with his charcoal wood and pine cones; on the narrow mezzanina above lived a cabinet-maker, a tailor, and a shoemaker, whilst the first, second, and third floors were occupied by a bookseller and librarian, and were known in the quarter as the *Libreria Ardiglione*.

On these floors every yard of space was filled to overflowing with books.

There was a little kitchen, a little sitting-room, two little bedrooms, mere closets ; and all the rest served as storage for books, books, books, nothing but books—and old books all of them, moreover—for their owner would no more have sold new books than he would have sold daily newspapers ; either were abominations in his sight. A place of business might easily have been put in a more accessible locality than the Tower of Taddeo. But his father had been there before him, and his grandfather also ; and if the dark, steep, breakneck stairs deterred customers from mounting them, its present proprietor, Francesco Ardiglione, commonly called Ser Checchi, had more leisure time in which to pore over his treasures, and chase the mice away from them, and

add to them by visits to bookstalls in the town, and to any remote ancient rural place where it was known that there were any volumes of interest or age to be purchased. Books, even choice and antique ones, fetch but little in Italy ; and many scores of valuable volumes rot away in old rooms or granaries, or cellars, no one noticing them except the rats. In the country which once produced the noblest literature in the world, books are in the present era the least esteemed, are read the least, and are regarded with the most indifference and contempt.

Ardiglione was a man of some sixty-five years old ; he had the true scholar's stoop of the throat and shoulders, and the true scholar's eyes, luminous and benign and dreamy ; his head was fine, with

white hair which fell softly off a broad and noble forehead, and a complexion smooth, pale, and delicate, of the faint yellow hue of old ivory. In stature he was short, and in build frail and spare. His clothes were always very shabby, and his gait was awkward; but no one who looked on him could doubt that he had gentle blood in his veins and vast learning in his brain.

Everyone called him Ser Checchi, which is the Tuscan diminutive of Francesco, and he was the jest of the neighbourhood for his absence of mind and his simplicity in money matters; but no one, not the boldest and most impudent little rascal of the streets, would have dared to joke at him to his face, and the rudest rough of the populace stood aside



respectfully to let him go by on the curbstone.

He had married late in life, but his wife had long been dead, having bequeathed to him a ceaseless regret and two young children—a son, Cirillo, and a daughter, Beldia. Cirillo was a cause of trouble, Beldia was a perennial spring of joy. Their mother had been a German Swiss from the Canton of Freiburg, and they and her great-grandmother, a woman of Leyden, had given to the girl her sweet serenity of temper, as well as her fair hair, her fair skin, and her fine health. The boy had gone back for his type to far-off ancestors of more violent and headstrong temper, and had the dark brows, the black close-curling hair, the olive skin, the olive face, the slender

limbs, of the young men of Luca Signor-elli. In bygone days the Ardiglione had been amongst the territorial nobility of the Casentino, wild and arrogant people, riding out from their own castle gates, and holding their own against the Pope and the devil. In recent generations their impoverished descendants had become harmless, plodding, laborious citizens, tradespeople, and the like, living quietly, plainly, and honestly; but Cirillo seemed to have soared high over the heads of these his nearer progenitors, and to have come straight down from the days of the free lances and the mountain lords.

‘Race is a strange thing!’ said Ser Checchi, whenever he looked at his young son. ‘You may bury the warrior’s

seed in a trader's till for centuries and centuries, and at the end of them it will start up armed, and cry for blood.'

He was sorely troubled by his son ; and shaken by his exorbitant demands out of that peaceful, dusty, fragrant atmosphere which surrounds those who live amongst old books. Beldia, on the contrary, never had given him a moment's uneasiness since her babyish limbs had been strapped down in her swaddling clothes, and laid out in the sun by her country nurse, amongst the honeyed figs, and the drying tomatoes on the bench of a farmhouse door in the southern hills.

Despite the infantine captivity of her swaddling bands, she had grow into a tall and gracious woman, very finely formed, and having the more massive

muscle of her mother's race and her mother's sunny hair and milk-white complexion. On her reposed all the government of the family : the domestic direction, the tutelage of the youths who helped to carry on such business as was done, and all matters great and small appertaining to the Ardiglione household and to the small country place lying to the south of the city which belonged to her father. All larger financial questions were settled by Ser Checchi himself, but all smaller ones were the affair of Beldia ; and even at seventeen years old her hands and her mind were full, and her thoughts as busied as though she were a matron of fifty. She had a single servant who cooked, swept, ironed and dusted ; a sturdy widow, by

name Veronica, who did the marketing, saw to the linen, and cleaned as much as the presence of so many books allowed to be cleaned ; but this was all the help which Ser Checchi's daughter ever had, and she worked diligently and cheerfully herself all the year round.

It was she who set the flowers in fresh water under the Madonna's shrine every morning, who kept pots of geraniums and clove pinks and lemon verbena growing behind the broad casements, who, on the flat roof behind the battlements, had a little garden of young lemon-trees and rose-bushes, mignonette and sweet herbs, protected by matting in winter-time from the north winds which sweep down from the Apennines. It was Beldia who freed the mice from the

traps which Veronica set, and cherished the swallows who built beneath the machicolations, and petted Lillo the warehouse mastiff, and her own white Maremma dog Folko; and threw crumbs to the sparrows perching among the plants on the roofs, and carried carrots, and crusts, and cabbage-leaves to the charcoal-seller's mule, who was stabled in the basement.

‘ If she were not so clever, one would say she was daft,’ said Veronica, a good-natured soul, to whom, nevertheless, a sparrow only existed for the spit, and mice for the cats, and the food of a dog and the provender of a mule only concerned those who owned them.

Beldia had inherited from her mother one of those benignant and tender souls

whose compassion is as wide as the sea and whose kindness embraces all earth's creatures.

‘The heart of St. Francis came back into the world in your body,’ her father said to her once, seeing her standing on the roof in the sunshine amongst the young lemon-trees, with the pigeons and sparrows and swallows flying about her.

‘Beldia was only a nurse, not a saint,’ she said with a smile. Her namesake was nurse to Santa Fina, of San Gemignano, and so has a humble place in Hagiology.

‘It is well for me that I shall have you to be mine,’ said Ser Checchi, thinking that the day might not be so far distant from him when he should grow dull of sight, and stiff of limb, and able only

to sit and dream of books long read, and days long dead, as Petrarca used to sit in the loggia at Arqua.

At present, however, he was, though of slight frame, strong, and active after his own serious and leisurely fashion, and his physical and mental strength had been little impaired by his sedentary habits and his preference of the study to the air. His daughter incessantly meditated on and provided for his comfort and safety ; and dry shoes after a muddy walk, warm possets after a chilly day, well-aired linen, and well-cooked food, had not a little to do with his excellent enjoyment of health.

When he always found his coffee ready at six in the morning, his dinner ready at mid-day, his linen fresh and



whole, his papers arranged and docketed, his beloved books classified as far as he would permit such classification to disturb their chaos, he owed it all to Beldia, but it never occurred to him that it was so.

‘Good child, good child!’ he said sometimes to her dreamily, and she was more than content.

‘He never sees that the signorina is letting all her youth and playtime go by for his sake,’ the servant Veronica grumbled to herself. ‘He thinks a sight more of that graceless, heartless, devil-may-care spendthrift, Cirillo.’

Yet it was not that Ser Checchi thought little of his daughter: he thought much of her, but he was so used to rely on her, to turn to her, and

to have all his material necessities forestalled by her, that he noticed what he owed to her no more than most people—alas for them !—notice the beauty of sunshine and sky.

Beldia was esteemed by the few, the very few, who knew her as a grave, strong, energetic maiden, careful as to pence, watchful as to waste, thinking constantly of the little clerk's misdeemeanours, the price of fish and meat, the cost of clothing, the rise in charcoal, the wear and tear of linen. But underneath that prosaic surface there were in her a musing and poetic nature, an imagination which was mute, but none the less vitally and quickly touched to fine excess. When she sat in the dusk of the early evening, or in the faint

lamplight of the later night, whilst her father was busied amongst his books below her, and the serving-woman in her kitchen above, she would let her work drop on her lap, and the shadowy spirits of the past come about her.

As a little child she had been brought up on their farm in the Casentino ; and those early years had filled her with a need of and longing for country sights and sounds, wide landscapes and broad skies. But the tower was still more dear to her, too, in its own way, and when the wood burned on its hearth, and the lamplight flickered on its grated windows, and its oaken chests, and its dusky ancient pictures, it had for her the warm, deep, abiding charm of home : that

charm of which those of her generation usually understood nothing.

It is a charm which takes most hold, and can best be felt, in ancient houses, where many generations have lived and loved, where the suffering of birth and of death has gone on for centuries, where the painted angels on the ceilings have looked down in pity on so many beds of pain, and the bright cherubs on the walls have laughed through their maze of flowers on so many lovers whose bones have mouldered for so many years ; in ancient houses, whence emanates a sense of multitudinous life, of sacred and softened death, of ghosts who come tenderly and in affection amongst the living who have replaced them ; and in such houses there is a sanctity which endears them to

the dwellers in them, if these have eyes to see the unseen, and souls tender enough to venerate the dead.

The back of the tower rose above the Arno amidst red-roofed and brown-roofed buildings, gray and moss-grown with age, with terraces on which linen was blowing, and wallflowers were blossoming, and weather-vanes of all kinds and colours and shapes were shifting about to the winds. From her own platform at the top of the tower Beldia could see the river-reaches to right and left of her, and the beautiful lines of the mountains; the cool dark woods of the Cascine and the shining marbles of San Miniato; and across the water, above the palaces on the opposite quay, the dome of the cathedral and the lantern-tower of the

Palazzo Vecchio. It was her supreme happiness and recreation to stand there at sunrise or at sunset, and look up at the glad and glorious sky above, and the gliding stream beneath, now green, now brown, now dun coloured, with the reflections of the lights trembling on its surface, and all the sounds of the city softened and spiritualized by distance.

There were so many of those towers once in this city; and now they are nearly all levelled and destroyed by people who prefer factory chimneys with their hellish stench, and the frightful follies of the jerry-builder. Dante would have sat quite content amongst its book-lined walls, and Fra Angelico would have painted happily at its barred casement, and Leonardo would

have drawn and modelled joyfully on its flat roof so near the clouds, amidst the pigeons and the bells; but what could any one of them do in a machine-room or in a modern villa?

The old tower dated far back to the earliest days of the Republic. It had felt iron and lead and flame. It had seen combat rage and blood flow like water down its narrow street. It had known all that full, rich, various, splendid life which came with the effulgence of the Renaissance. It was itself a part and parcel of all that noble and splendid existence, and as such it was doubly dear to this quiet maiden, deep down in whose heart was the reverence for all great things, and heroic lives, and beautiful creations.

She could make a fritter ably, and could iron like a clear-starcher, and could see quickly when the butcher and the baker tried to cheat her ; but all the same she honoured art and nature, and when she saw them outraged she was herself ashamed. She had been born with the eyes which see, and the ears which hear, and the scholarly and historic atmosphere in which she had been reared from her babyhood made her perceptions clearer, and her thoughts finer, than are those of most women. She loved these things which were around her ; and she knew why she loved them, which was more.

For an unintelligent love, whether for man or for nature, is of little benefit to either, because it knows not what it



does ; and so does oftentimes more harm than good, and only tortures when it seeks to serve.

When she had leisure to dream, she liked to lay her head back against her chair, and close her eyes, and think of all those scenes on which the iron torch-rings and stanchions and the dark and gruesome walls had gazed. Full many a time must they have seen their creator, Gaddi himself, watching them in their rising, his fine straight profile like a cameo against the light, and the woollen lucco wrapped about his head to keep out the north wind.

She had a great reverence for the elder Gaddi ; it seemed to her that he had never got his full meed of fame. He built the Campanile, and it is called

Giotto's; he built San Michele, and it is called Orcagna's. True, those masters did design both belfry and church; but he built them, and all alone he both designed and built the Ponte Vecchio, the Goldsmith's Bridge, which has no rival anywhere except the arch named after the *alta Riva* of Venice, and which has stood the sieges and floods and storms of six hundred years, and will stand six centuries more unless the accursed greed of municipal speculation seizes on its stones. Taddeo Gaddi led one of the loveliest, happiest, manliest lives ever led on earth, such a life as it is impossible to lead now, because the atmosphere which then made it possible nowhere now exists. But of fame in the mouths of posterity he has not had his

full portion. Of the many thousands who every season pass over his bridge, scarce one Florentine, or one foreigner, in a million remembers its architect.

In old times the tower had been a fortress, and had felt the tramp of steel-clad feet and the roar of discharging arquebuses; many a dead body had been flung or dragged down its stairs, many an awful night of flame and fury had settled darkly down upon its roof; torches had flared in its rings to light many a mortal combat, and many a foeman had fallen stiff and stark upon its stones. It had stood there in the Borgo San Jacopo ever since A.D. 1230, the date carved on the stone of its threshold, and the whole course of Florentine history had passed through

the deep and narrowed street on which its frontage looked. Like its street, it had seen the citizens in mortal feud with the mercenaries, and the artisans in fierce struggle with the ducal or imperial soldiers ; and had seen also many lovelier, happier, gayer scenes, when the white palfreys had ambled with a nuptial party beneath its walls, and the carnival masques had danced and rioted. It had heard the rousing calls of trumpet and bugle ; and the mellow rhythm of chant and anthem ; the hiss of burning oil and the shriek of ravaged women ; the resounding tread of the warhorse and the sweet singing of the Virgin's litany. It had beheld the Conte Verde pace gaily over the bridge, and the standard of justice rise in Michel di Lando's hand, and

Cosimo de' Medici sally out with his attendant dwarf to the siege of Siena, and Tasso pass on his tired horse, travelling from Ferrara, and Bianca Cappello go by with her fatal beauty, and Boccaccio hasten daily on his visits to his friend and scribe Francesco Manelli; and the Bardia's Dianora watch for her lover with her silken rope; and Ariosto and his lady of the golden palms come forth from the Hospice of the Knights of Malta and walk in peace together.

Once, tradition said, Saint Catherine had come up these very stairs when on her visit hard by to Nicolo Soderini; and Charles VIII.'s superb entry and stealthy exit had both passed along under it, and troops of wild condottiere had

ridden past in festal bravery, and ladies' silken litters had been borne in gay procession, and painters and singers had sung May-day lays and Christmas carols to their mistresses in the moonlight ; and it had seen the green maio blossoming and swinging in its doorway ; and on the night of the Fierucolone had been alive with sparkling, waving, fiery tow ; and the rusty big bell which hung below its flagstaff had added its voice to the clamour of the Carmine chimes ringing in the rising of the Ciompi ; and Francesco Ferruccio had run about under its shadow, a bright, bold baby with fearless eyes and sturdy limbs ; and its stones had been hot with the reflection of the fires burning the Bardi palaces and towers ; and Baccio della

Porta and Giovanni di San Giovanni had passed by there in gentler times, going to their studios by the Romano Gate; and in the little church of San Jacopo close at hand the nobles had once met to defend their rights and demand their share of government; and in the greater church of Santo Spirito hard by Piero Capponi had been brought to his burial with torches and banners countless, and the whole magistracy and populace weeping for his loss.

For anyone deeply versed in the traditions of the past, and amorous of their beauty, as she was, the dead arise and live again in such historic and hero-haunted precincts.

To the fool, to the vain, to the puffed-up ape of modernity, they are but dark

walls, narrow ways, dumb stones, closed portals : but to those who love them with humility and tenderness they are full of eloquent and undying life.

Beldia dreamed of these dead people often in her rare enjoyment of unoccupied time, and when she lay in her bed in the narrow chamber under the roof they came about her, smiling gladly or weeping wearily, and telling her many things.



## CHAPTER II.

BUT her moments of leisure were few and always brief, for she had a great deal of various work to do, and when she was not actively occupied her father gave her many papers to copy, and manuscripts to write out clearly, for he loved to pen learned dissertations on disputed points of history or archæology, and printed some of these at his own cost for the small, very small, number of persons who were interested in the abstruse subjects which interested himself.

Those square, solid rooms between

the four brick and stone walls of his tower, encumbered with hundreds and thousands of books, bound and unbound, were the whole world of Ser Checchi; and the chiming of the church bells, the cries and noises of the street, the twittering of the busy swallows, and the clang of the belfry clocks, had no power to disturb him, as he plodded through a black letter treatise of some extinct ecclesiastical order, or noticed respectfully, but doubtingly, some questionable copy of some of the Fathers of the Church, or penned a learned essay on some disputed point in Florentine history, or discoursed upon the publications of the Giuntina Classics, or the worth of some early quarto from Bernardo Cennini's press.

Custom came rarely, and money came

sparsely to the tower of the amorini; too sparsely for all except its master, who lived in the quiet shelter of his book-shelves, and only woke up unwillingly to perceive now and then that there were people around him who needed such tiresome and common things as oil and charcoal, boots and shoes, beans and bread.

To the scholar his own need of such things is always an odious necessity, importunate and disagreeable; and Ser Checchi, like Vespasino and Magliabecchi and Anton Cocchi before him, was a scholar to the inmost fibre of his heart, although only nominally a librarian and a bookseller.

At such rare occasions as he was absent on book-buying errands or anti-

quarian researches, Beldia stayed in those two sacred chambers of the library to be in readiness for any customers who might come thither ; but few customers of any kind climbed the steep stair. She sat at a little ancient desk amongst a sea of books, and watched the boy-clerk Poldo, who was as agile as a squirrel and as mischievous as a monkey, and answered in her grave, sweet voice all such questions and demands as people put to her.

The clientela of the tower was a sparse but a cultured one ; it consisted chiefly of aged men, grown gray in meditation, bibliophiles, antiquarians, philologists, professors of abstruse sciences, students of ecclesiastical history, lovers of what was old and obscure and difficult

to procure or decipher. From these learned priests and professors, who were friends of her father, she acquired a mass of information of a grave and noble kind, though not of the kind which is popular or usual in a world busied with modern things. She knew as well as her father what volumes treated of this, that, or the other subject, and could find such authorities unerringly amongst the thousands of books tossed all together in a great heap, like the stones on a wayside cairn. ‘We will ask the maiden,’ said all these rusty scholars one to another, when they wanted any treatise found, or any monograph on a forgotten theme discovered. Beldia could find it, if anybody could. Altogether unknown to herself, the name of Ser

Checchi's daughter became spoken of beyond these reverend gentlemen by younger and more imaginative men; a narrow circle still, for it was limited to scholars, and scholars of a certain kind, but these, though few, brought others, less learned, but equally curious about a pretty girl enshrined in musty books like a flower glowing among sand and rocks. These younger visitants, lawyers, teachers, professors, architects, and the like, received but a cold welcome from Beldia, and a suggestion that they could as well pursue their studies at the Magliabecchian or Laurentian libraries. Nevertheless, two or three of them had, undaunted by her reception, made her offers of marriage, which she had at once, and without consideration, re-

jected; not even disturbing the peace of her father by telling him of such follies.

She loved the books and the city, the country and the mountains; and that was all. She had hardly even read of love, for, from the severity of her father's intellectual tastes, most of the poets and all the novelists were banished. She knew that men and women loved, and sometimes were married and sometimes were not; but it all seemed very foolish, and altogether out of her own path. Ser Checchi always told her that Beatrice was only a metaphor, and Laura only a symbol, and it seemed to her that any love which she might ever feel would be also only a metaphor, only a symbol. But the young men who were patronized

by Veronica did not suggest to her either of these.

For the moment she had no sentiment save for her father, who, if he did not fully appreciate her value, was most gentle, kind, and reverent to her, as he was to all living and dead things, from the chandler's mastiff who kept guard at the warehouse, to the nuns who came to solicit alms at his door; from the old woman who sold vegetables on the other side of the street, to the beautiful bronze Bacchus which stands in a niche at the corner of his street, to which he took off his hat once a day regularly in memory of the classic past which it symbolized. It was not because he was neglectful or unfeeling that it never occurred to him that the life led by Beldia



was a dull and sad one for a woman of her years ; he had taught her Latin, and she had free and unrestricted access to all his books : what more could any human soul desire ? Moreover, when the heats of July came, he went away reluctantly, for her sake, to their little place in the Casentino ; locking up the beloved books with enormous iron keys, which had in other times served to lock in human prisoners in the precincts of the tower. He descended twice a week into the city to visit them, and carried up into the hill with him new purchases which required looking into, or rebacking, or were worthy of study or annotation ; but these summer months at Antella were painful to him, though he bore them meekly, and he was never really

happy until he was down again in the narrow, dusky street, under the wings of his own angels and amorini. To Beldia the return was not so joyful: she loved the breezy hills, the windswept stretches of heather and gorse, the pomp of the sunset, the spirituality of the sunrise, the tall, straight trunks of the pine-trees with the woodpeckers and the cuckoos flitting between them; the steep, narrow, sandy roads, with the mule-carts of the charcoal-burners winding down them; the divine rural stillness in which the distant bells rang softly as with a blessing.

She loved all these things with that ardour which lovers of the country know so well; and when she came back into the city life, its confinement, and want of light and restricted horizon were

painful to her, but she said nothing, and took up her yoke of daily tasks, and bore it bravely ; and after all she loved the tower with a fonder passion, a more filial affection, than she felt for any other thing or place.

She rarely went out when in the town for pleasure : she attended Mass at one of the many churches near at hand, and bought what she wanted at the shops of her quarter ; sometimes she went to market on such days as her woman was busy ironing the linen which had been washed in the country, or bottling off into flasks the barrels of oil and of wine which had come from there.

Other generations will not know the old Florence market as Beldia and

Veronica knew it, under the gloomy and noble shadows of the ancient towers and palaces ; a union of colour, form, light, shade, costume, and architecture which was delightful to the eyes and which now is to be no more seen, because greed, and bad taste, and passion for change, and shame of ancient ways, and jealousy of ancient fame, have conspired together and decided to raze its precincts to the ground. The old market, with its amber-hued leathern awnings, its good-humoured populace, its piles of fruits, and herbs, and vegetables, its centre of jest and bargain, its ever-turning public spits, its noisy and joyous animation, gathered underneath the stately walls, the high roofs, the grated casements, was a picture meet for the

burin of Callot and the brush of Carpaccio. Now it is no more ; the venders are shut up in cases of iron and glass hideous to behold, and the buyers hurry over their purchases, cross and cantankerous, and the old grace and the old mirth and old colours are things dead and gone for ever.

But when Beldia dwelt in the tower of Taddeo they were still existent ; and she was wont to take her way, as soon as the sun was up, over the Jeweller's Bridge to the market ; always giving a thought backward over the centuries to Cammilla Martelli, who, for her sorrow, was once seen sitting at her lone casement on that bridge by the great Medici, and knew a sultry, brief summer of love and happiness, followed by a long life-

time of enforced seclusion and unavailing regret.

And yet Cammilla's had been an enviable fate, she thought; to have known that wondrous magical transformation of circumstance, and to be remembered by the poets and the scholars and the artists, whenever they pass over the paved road between the little quaint, glittering shops; to live in memory thus, associated for ever with the stories of the city—such a destiny seemed to Beldia the most beautiful kind of immortality that anyone could wish or gain.

But her remembrance of Cammilla and of many another lovely legend did not prevent her, when she came to the market stalls, from looking very shrewdly

at the feet of the chickens she bought, and at the gills of the fish she purchased, to be sure of their age and freshness, and no one would have been able by specious words to persuade her that stale spinach was fresh, or that eggs from a crate were new-laid. The poetic side of her nature made her say a prayer for the soul of Cammilla; but the practical side of her character made her get due value for every centime she spent. She would give to the poor as though she had Ceres' horn of plenty; but she would not be cheated out of a bronze halfpenny.

Veronica scolded, shrieked, bullied, and wrangled violently for an hour, only to be put off at last with inferior victuals; but Beldia, though she never

raised her voice a semitone higher, and never said a harsh word to anyone, was not to be imposed upon, and all the market knew it.

‘It is the maiden of Taddeo’s tower. She must have her own way,’ said the sellers of fish, flesh, and fowl, provoked, and yet admiring.

In these early morning excursions she was dressed like a girl of the people, with thick shoes and a short kirtle; a handkerchief, woollen or silken according to the season, was tied over her shining hair, and a big basket was poised upon her arm. But there was something in her walk, and in the carriage of her head, and in her soft, clear, low speech, which spoke of race and of culture, and opened a free, unmolested



passage for her amongst the noisy and rough throng there. Many young men looked at, followed, and would have addressed her, but she daunted them by the absolute unconsciousness which she seemed to have of their existence, and a certain severity of pride which now and then hardened her features, which were attractive, gentle, and fair, not unlike the Madonnas of Lippo Lippi.

‘ One could paint her with a nimbus, and a little Christ sucking at her breast, and a St. John with a lily standing at her knee,’ thought one of these persons watching her as she stood for a moment at the flower-stall: he was a teacher at the Belle Arte, and spoke to a friend younger than himself, who was an architect from Lombardy.

‘Yes; I see,’ said the younger man. ‘I would sooner make her a statue of Charity, with a rod of white lilies in her hand, and her foot on a snake, and a star on her brow shedding rays of light; that is my idea of Charity—the Charity which thinks no evil. We have had enough of Charities modelled on nursing mothers. No, I am not disrespectful to Correggio and Holbein, nor even to Bouguereau.’

They were standing by the pillar which is called the Column of Mars, and where it is said that Buondelmonte fell. Beldia had just passed them carrying her basket, and had stopped at the corner of the Strozzi palace to look at the flowers which were there for sale.

‘How admirably she walks!’ the

Lombard added. ‘Who is she? A poor girl? A maiden or a matron?’

‘Not poor and not married. She is the daughter of the old librarian at the old tower of the Brancalone which Taddeo Gaddi built,’ replied the Florentine.

‘I know the tower, I think,’ said his companion. ‘What kind of books does he sell?’

‘Old books, ecclesiastical, historical, philosophical, architectural, which will suit you. He is a droll old fellow, crammed with useless learning; we go there sometimes to see him and his girl: she is often all alone amongst the books, and knows a good deal about them also.’

‘She looks like some learned daughter of *docta Bonnonia*.’

‘Despite the market basket and the handkerchief on her head?’

‘Yes; she wears the one till it looks like Minerva’s casque, and carries the other as if it contained the books of the Sibyl.’

‘She is more a Madonna than a Sibyl, I think.’

‘Then let us hope, for her own sake, that she will have the sucking Gesu, not the Sibylline tomes.’

They parted company a few moments later, the Florentine to go to his class at the Accademia, where he was a teacher of perspective; the other, a stranger in the town, strolled towards the river, which was in a flood from recent rain-falls, yellow and brown with earth, and carrying shrubs, and trees, and hay, and

straw, and planks, and rocks which it had loosened and whirled down on its way.

Insensibly following a romantic impulse, the Lombard, a man of Brescia, crossed the bridge of the Holy Trinity and bent his steps to that old shady quarter of Ol<sup>to</sup>arno, where the tower of the loves was to be found. It was very little past eight of the clock; a fine, clear, breezy morning after the storms of the night. The deep bell of Santo Spirito was tolling sonorously for some citizen's death.

‘It is too early to go and buy a book,’ he thought; ‘I had better go and breakfast first.’

Nearly opposite to the tower which he wished to observe was a humble eat-

ing place, half bakery, half coffee-house, with round, big loaves, and baskets of eggs, and a card which intimated that within might be had a cup of coffee and a white roll for the small price of thirty centimes.

‘This collation will not ruin me,’ thought the student of Brescia, whose purse was scantily furnished; and he pushed open the door and entered, disturbing a sleek white and gray cat by his entrance.

They served him quickly, for the coffee was already on the fire in a back-kitchen behind the shop; the air was full of the sweet, appetising smell of newly-baked bread; the cat came and had a share of the milk. Whilst he ate and drank the Brescian looked at the

tower, which was visible a few yards farther down the street, the morning sunshine glistening on its amorini, and its garlands, and its saints.

‘A fine old tower, that,’ he said to the woman who had served him, a clean, buxom young woman, with red Titian-coloured hair, and a yellow cotton jacket. ‘It was built by Taddeo, was it not?’

She shrugged her shoulders.

‘We call it Taddeo’s tower, or the tower of the loves, if you like that better. You see all those little loves gambolling above the doorway? It belongs to old Maso Donati, the grain merchant, and Ser Checchi has lived in it all his life, and so did his fathers before him.’

‘Ser Checchi?’ repeated the Brescian inquiringly.

‘The old man who lives in the books like a worm. The whole place is full of books up to the roof; he could fill the cellars, too, only Nani and Peppino have them for their goods. Ser Checchi is a little cracked, you know. Those over-learned people always are half daft. If you overfill the barrel it will leak somewhere.’

‘No doubt. But I am fond of books myself. Will he sell any?’

‘Surely! Selling them is his trade; but nobody ever buys. They go there, the old ones to read and jabber and steal his learning, and the young ones to make court to the signorina, for she is handsome, and some think she will have



money; but I know better—che !—the old man is a leaking barrel, I tell you, and his money trickles away with his wits.'

She looked very knowing, and made a gesture as of one who pours water upon the ground, and struck the silver pin in her hair a smart blow, with the air of a person who could tell a great deal if she chose. The Brescian conceived an instantaneous hatred of her.

'Do they buy your bread?' he said with curt significance.

'Che ! not they. They make their own. They bake once a week, and so eat well one day in seven, and all the other six eat crusts as hard as bricks.'

'I see,' said her customer, and thought to himself, 'When you want a baker's

good word do not eat home-made bread.'

'There is old Ser Checchi!—look!' said the young woman, pointing to a stooping figure, clothed in old-fashioned clothes, which came forth from the doorway underneath the playing loves.

'Going to buy more books, I will warrant!' she said with supreme contempt. 'That is the way his daughter's dower goes, in old musty, fusty, mouldy, mildewed, worm-eaten things which nobody in their senses would ever use to wrap up a pat of butter. And when I asked him once if he could sell me a copy of the Sesto Astrologer's Calendar, which tells you all that is going to happen all through the year, he laughed at me, and said he did not keep such silly rubbish

in his place. Silly ! the Astrologer of Sesto ! Did ever you know such impudence ?’

‘ Rank blasphemy,’ replied the Lombard, gazing curiously and reverently at the venerable figure of Ser Checchi as it went down the narrow street in the shadow cast by the tall dark houses.

‘ But the librarian is away now,’ he added. ‘ If anyone wanted to buy books, or to look over some in stock, would the shop be open ?’

‘ Shop ! Che ! He has no shop—he has nothing so sensible. There are rooms and rooms, and there are books in all of them, one over another, like the flotsam and jetsam floating and tossing on Arno to-day, and there is

Madonna Beldia to tell you all about them as if she were a printed book herself. If there were a shop where the warehouse is, with some glass and gilding and fine-bound books behind it, in red and blue and yellow, as you see them in Tornabuoni Street, I dare say he would sell some and wouldn't be out at elbows, as he is, they say, and at his wits' end how to pay Cirillo's debts. Yes, Cirillo is the son : a fine lad, the only one of them who has any spirit or sense. He has been a soldier, and now he is a painter down in Rome.'

'Art is a poor trade to all but the few who "arrive," as the French say,' answered the Brescian as he rose, paid his three bronze coins, thanked her courteously, and left the place.

With that instinct of secrecy which accompanies the dawn of all amorous fancy, he did not choose that the loquacious and malicious neighbour should see him go to the tower. So he sauntered in a leisurely fashion along the street, lighted a cigarette and smoked it, and went as far as the Piazza of Santo Spirito, where he stood awhile gazing at the massive dome and the graceful campanile; then he turned back and retraced his steps, and before many minutes had passed found himself back again in that most ancient street, where the loves of Luca della Robbia guarded the tower portal. Arrived before the door, he threw away the cigarette, and began to ascend the staircase—Lillo, the big brindled mastiff who belonged to

the warehouse, smelling in a distant but not unfriendly manner at him as he went by ; he was a stranger, but Lillo let him go by unchallenged.

The staircase was dark as night, being lighted only by small slits in the wall like portholes, through which in other ages the defenders of the place had been able to fire their arquebuses, or pour their hot pitch on their assailants below in the street. On the first floor he found an open door, above which he could read in a dim light the words ‘ *Libreria Ardiglione* ’ written on a placard, and underneath them the inscription which used to be above the entrance of the Marrucillian library : ‘ *Publicæ Maxime Pauperum Utilitatio.* ’ With uncovered head he entered this

chamber, and found himself, as the bakeress had told him that he would do, in a sea of books tossed one over another like the petrified waves of a once-heaving ocean. That chamber was only occupied by the books, but in a farther room he saw a boy writing at a desk, and at another desk was seated the woman or girl whom he had seen by the Column of Mars.

Then a great diffidence came over him, and although in Brescia, in Cremona, in Bergamo, he had always been ready to talk and laugh with women, he stood now on the threshold of the inner room hesitating and mute.

Then Beldia saw him and rose.

‘ Good-morning, sir,’ she said to him in her serene, harmonious tones. ‘ Is

there anything in which I can have the pleasure to serve you ?’

She was dressed in a plain gray gown, and had no ornament of any sort, and her hair was as closely wound around her head as its large coils would allow ; but standing there amongst the sea of books, she looked to his already captured fancy, as she leaned one arm upon her desk, like the Sibylla Persica of Guercino : she had the Sibyl’s serious and yet smiling expression, a look at once of meditation and of expectation, of brightness and of repose.

He gazed at her with such earnestness that he embarrassed her, and, seeing that he did so, he stammered some request for works on architecture.

‘That is rather a vague demand,’ said



Beldia doubtfully. ‘Of what kind, of what epoch, of what tongue?’

‘Any age you will,’ answered her customer incoherently, ‘and whether Italian or Latin, it is the same to me.’

Beldia hesitated, feeling that the request was only a feint to excuse his entrance.

‘If you could return in the afternoon my father would be here,’ she said at last. ‘He is more acquainted with such works than I; he is an archæologist, and very learned.’

‘I should be honoured to make the acquaintance of Ser Francesco,’ replied the Brescian, recovering his address as he observed her embarrassment. ‘But I need—I greatly need—at once a copy

of Piranesi : or, at least, I cannot afford to purchase it, but might I be allowed to verify one passage?’

‘We have a before-letter copy of Piranesi here,’ said Beldia, ‘and you are welcome to look through any of the volumes.’

She went to one spot in the crowded shelves where various works of that date were gathered, and pointed out the ‘*Antichitæ Romanæ*’ to the stranger, whilst she bade the boy Poldo take the books down and carry them to the table.

‘You are too good,’ murmured the young man ; ‘I am ashamed to give so much trouble.’

‘It is no trouble,’ she answered. ‘And my father is always glad if he can

be of use to scholars. Ours is a library rather than a shop.'

'And a very hospitable one,' he said gratefully. 'I am an architect from the north, I know no one in your city, and can have no claim upon your literary hospitality. My name is Odisio Fontano,' he added timidly. 'Is it familiar to you?' he asked, as he saw a light as of recognition pass over her face.

'Oh, in the past,' she answered. 'It was a good and great name of Lombardy.'

'That is a very long while ago,' said the young man. 'We have fallen from our high estate, and have been poor people for centuries.'

'That does not alter anything. What was, was ; and the Fontano shield hangs,

I believe, on the Broletto of Bergamo.'

'Yes, truly, we were lords in Bergamo. But that is long, long ago, as I said. Now we are very poor.'

'But how did your people change from Bergamo to Brescia?'

'It was in the last century. My great grandfather married a gentlewoman of Brescia.'

'Indeed!' said Beldia, intimating by her accent that this colloquy had lasted long enough.

It took him a long while to find the plate or the passage which he required, and ever and again he kept looking off divers volumes to where Beldia sat, who was writing diligently, making a copy for her father of some monograph or

some annotated paragraph, and was wholly undisturbed by the presence of a stranger.

The sound from the narrow street came muffled to that height, seeming far away as in a dream ; Poldo caught flies and yawned, and furtively nibbled nuts, where he sat at his desk with his back turned to his mistress ; the mouldy yet fragrant smell of old books and of old walls filled the chamber ; a stray sun-beam came in through the thick, dull glass, and touched the maiden's throat and hair.

The young man sighed, and closed a copy of Marco Recci's designs as the clock tolled eleven.

‘ Can you not find what you want ? Tell me what it is, and perhaps I can

help you,' said Beldia, as she ended the last line of her copy.

He coloured and murmured his thanks and excuses.

As he wanted nothing that any books could give him and his search was wholly fictitious, he could not reply more clearly ; he could not say : ' I only wanted to look at you, and see the sunshine play amongst the little curls above your throat.'

' May I return to have the honour of seeing your father ?' he asked her, as he rose and replaced the big volume with respect upon its shelf.

' Our library is always open until six,' said Beldia, taking his inquiry literally, ' and my father is always glad to be of use to scholars, as I told you.'

She remained standing, as a hint to him to take his departure. But he still lingered, fascinated by the still, ancient, studious place, and its fair-haired occupant.

‘Have you anything to say?’ she asked at last, a little impatiently. ‘Is there any message which you wish to leave—any work or passage which you wish especially to consult?’

‘No, no ; nothing,’ said the Lombard hurriedly. ‘Pardon me, madamigella ; I have intruded so long. I will return at three, by your kind permission.’

Then at last he went ; and Beldia, returning to her seat, sought out other work to do, and bent her fair head over her inkstand.

The stranger had made little impres-

sion upon her; she was so used to see men come and go, and she did not concern herself with them except as scholars. This one had seemed to her a desultory and half-hearted student by the distraught manner in which he had turned over the precious pages of the famous works.



### CHAPTER III.

AT eleven Ser Checchi returned, and at two o'clock they sat down to their dinner in a little room which, though nominally set aside for eating, was overflowing with books and papers. Their dinner was frugal, but Beldia had been taught by her mother that good cooking means good digestion, and the dishes were savoury and excellent, though few in number; the wine was the sound though simple drink of their own vineyards, and artistic instinct had made her

set a few daffodils and late anemones in a vase of Casteldurante pottery four centuries old. The slovenliness and unloveliness and disorder of ordinary Italian ways were alien to her ; and the antique silver shone, the old china was bright, and the homespun linen was white and scented with iris and rosemary, upon her table. Ser Checchi did not notice these things, but he derived a vague, unconscious gratification from them, and would have missed them had they been wanting there.

To him his daughter remained always a little girl. He never realized that she was now twenty-three years old, and that her life had not much more pleasure in it than a nun's, except in so far as her intelligence and her perceptions gave her

joys and interests, and her power of ruling her house taught her that independence which is to the character what a fresh sea-wind blowing over it is to an expanse of waters.

It was a very simple, regular, retired life which she led in her old tower. She had few friends and no distractions; but she was happy and interested in her many occupations, and whether she sat in winter by the open hearth with its brass dogs, or in summer on her terrace amongst the carnations and mignonettes, her hand was busied with work, and her eyes regaled themselves on a book.

It was what most women of her age would have called a dull life, but she was never dull; there was so much to do, so much to see to, so much to think

of, and her rare leisure was never long enough to learn all that she desired to learn from history and art.

Her father was the great occupation of her existence. To forestall all his wishes, to get the best and uttermost that could be got out of their means for him, to spare him all trouble and worry, and to be, as it were, a lamp before his feet in all shadows, was her constant desire and effort. Ser Checchi, man-like, never guessed or measured all the continual thought and care and sacrifice which went to make up the sum of his daily comforts and customs, and kept the atmosphere of his household clear and serene about him.

He loved his daughter with a great and most tender love, but he thought

her lot an enviable one, and underrated, because he did not understand, the unselfishness of her devotion to himself. For the rest, gentle and sweet of temper although he was, he held to ancient views concerning parental authority, and had unconsciously something of the old Greek and Roman contempt for the mind and the opinions of women.

She, indeed, could read Latin well, and could quote great authors without error, and could find chapter and verse in the classics and the Fathers of the Church ; and this he knew, because it was his own doing that her studies had taken this bent ; still, he would never have consulted her seriously upon any matter of business or learning, and would not have deemed her opinion worth asking

on anything beyond a fruit-pudding, a roll of linen, or a sack of fresh coffee-berries.

Therefore of his affairs, and of his possessions, she knew little or nothing ; all she had to do was to lay out to the utmost of her ability the sum given her for household expenses, rent, taxes, and the wages of Veronica ; the boy, Poldo, was in a manner apprenticed, and received nothing but his food, which was no small matter, for his appetite was huge, as the human appetite usually is when it can be indulged at another person's expense.

To the Lombard she seemed like a fair and fine lily growing in a sunless garden-border ; but to her father, as to herself, she appeared a maiden excep-

tionally blest, and safe, and happy, with little money indeed, but otherwise most ravoured.

Many a time Veronica longed to take her master to task for his negligence of his daughter's interest, in not having had her married, or at least betrothed, before her twentieth year, a period which seems in Italy the commencement of old age for every woman. But Ser Checchi, with his dreamy gentleness, inspired a respect which amounted to awe in the breast of his dependents. Out of his sight she despised him as a useless oddity who did not know his right hand from his left, and who would drink vinegar for wine without perceiving it; but in his presence the rough, coarse, sensual mind of the servant felt

the influence which emanates from a high intelligence and a stainless character ; she did not dare to blame her employer to his face. She had never, in the twenty years that she had been in his service, seen him seriously angry, except once. It was when Cirillo was about twelve years of age ; he had stolen a cake of panforte (a kind of petrified plum-pudding dear to the appetite of Tuscans) from the cupboard of a neighbour, and then the wrath of the gentle scholar had been terrible, and had left an ineffaceable impression on the memories of all around him. Since then Cirillo had done many worse things, but Veronica had never forgotten that scene after the theft of the cake. ‘ From the anger of meek Ser Checchi the saints



deliver me !' she said often whilst crossing herself.

' Why will you send all the youths away ?' she asked her young mistress once ; she had many a silver coin slipped into her hand by these suitors, and favoured them one and all impartially. ' I suppose you will not spend all your life dusting books and copying papers, and tending on Ser Checchi day and night ?'

' I dare say I shall,' replied Beldia tranquilly. ' Do you think that I should have to work, and dust, and write, and sew the less for any one of those young men ? They all wish to marry me because they know I am useful.'

' But you are beautiful, too, my dear,' said Veronica. ' And the lads see

that, and they would make a queen of you.'

'For a week or two, yes. And then they would want their shirts, and their soup, and their cigarettes, and their absinthe; and I should be the slave. I would rather be my father's slave. He is a tender master.'

'Ser Checchi is good. I never said he was not good,' said Veronica crossly. 'But there is such a thing as pleasure, and such a thing as love; and like goes to like, and youth to youth.'

'Oh!' Beldia laughed a little with the supreme derision of ignorance. 'You know I do not think of these follies, 'Nica, and the youngsters you patronize are not likely to inspire them.'

'What do you wait for?' grumbled

the old servant. ‘Do you think a god will come down from the skies or a knight out of the tapestry?’

‘I wait for Ulysses,’ said Beldia gaily.

‘Anybody over seas? A stranger?’ said Veronica sharply, with sudden suspicion: could her young mistress have an affection unknown to her faithful servant?

‘Very far over seas,’ replied Beldia. ‘Over the far, far seas of death.’

‘Pish! Some of your rubbishing history men!’ said Veronica, with scorn; to her thinking a living lover, who wore a gold watch, chain, and a ruby ring, and who could take his dama to the Pagliano and the Politeama, was worth all the heroes of Greece and of Rome.

To Beldia, whose mind was filled with

the heroic figures of the men of old, from the days of Troy to the days of Montemurlo, the young men of her own generation, with their round hats, their foul cigars, their checked trousers, their cropped pates, their bad manners, seemed rather like apes, corrupted in morals and ill-dressed in person, than beings of the same humanity as Odysseus or Caracciolo, Leonidas or Ferruceio.

Her heart had never been touched to even so much as a passing sentiment by any of these suitors of modern days. She loved her father, she loved her brother, she loved the tower of Taddeo, and these three filled up her heart.

Of all outside worlds, the worlds of great passions and great ambitions, of ceaseless movement and breathless ex-

citement, she knew nothing whatever. She saw, indeed, the equipages rolling by along the river's length, with the young and graceful people in them, to whom, surely, she thought, life must be like one long play-hour. But she knew nothing of these, and they never troubled her. Envy was not in her nature, and her days were full of contentment. The only anxiety which she had was the culpable extravagance of her brother and the harmless extravagance of her father. Neither of these male creatures attached the smallest value to money. It was always Beldia on whom the burden devolved of making ends meet in the household. If everything, indeed, had been in her hands, the task would have been easier; but in many

matters Ser Checchi kept his own counsel carefully; she was ignorant of all the resources which he possessed and of many things which he did.

Scarcely was their dinner over this afternoon, and she had peeled for him a Bergamot pear, preserved in straw through the winter, than a knock came at the door of the dining-room, and a pleasant, cheerful voice asked through the keyhole :

‘ May Vestuccio speak a moment with the honoured master ?’

Even as the words were being uttered, the door was softly opened, and the speaker advanced into the room.

He was a man of middle age, and of that indefinable class to which belong working men who have made money ;

he had a candid, kind, and attractive countenance, his eyes were clear and laughing, and his mouth good-natured, with a quiet smile very familiar to it; his glance was quick, too, and not so frank as was his smile.

Across the calm, thoughtful features of Ser Checchi a shadow of troubled impatience passed. He rose hurriedly, leaving the pear untasted, and passed to the door.

‘Not here, not here, Vestuccio,’ he said quickly. ‘Go to my own room; in a moment I will be with you.’

‘Your servant, Ser Checchi,’ said the new-comer, pausing a moment in the doorway, whilst his eyes rested on the Casteldurante vase with an expression of inquisitive appreciation.

‘ Good-morning, Signor Aurelio,’ said Beldia courteously; and Aurelio Vestuccio bowed his salutation in return with flattered eagerness and his brightest smile.

Ser Checchi, in a hurried manner, unlike his slow and quiet movements, did not return to his seat, but led his visitor away.

‘ Oh, father ! the pear !’ cried Beldia, in dismay at such neglect of her finest fruit.

‘ Eat it yourself, my love,’ said Ser Checchi, as he hastily closed the door behind him.

‘ The master seems troubled,’ said Veronica to her mistress, and Beldia looked at her apprehensively and wistfully.

‘ No, no ; he is always pleased to see



Ser Aurelio,' she said, with a trace of anxiety in her glance at the closed doorway. 'I dare say Vestuccio has come to let him know that some manuscript or copy he wishes for is beyond his reach, and that vexes him.'

'Some people speak ill of Vestuccio,' said the servant dubiously.

'Some people speak ill of the saints in heaven,' replied Beldia.

'Ugh! He is no saint,' said Veronica. 'But he has a good name on the Piazza, that I grant.'

A good name on the Piazza means a fair repute amongst your fellows. It is derived from the habit which the Italian citizens had in the past, and still have in the present, of congregating in some public square, generally before the com-

munal palace, to make their bargains and discuss the solvency or insolvency of their debtors. A good name on the Piazza will carry a man far and well in his commercial transactions, as a fair breeze carries a sailing boat.

Aurelio Vestuccio had this good name.

‘I hope they will not be away long,’ said Beldia; ‘for that stranger of this forenoon is returning to see my father and talk about architecture. If you hear anyone coming up the stairs, ask him to wait in the book-room.’

Veronica grumbled inaudibly, and began to clear away the dinner dishes, leaving the Casteldurante pot and the spring-tide flowers sole occupants of the table.

At that moment the bell attached to

the entrance door, which opened on the staircase, rang gently. There is a great deal of character shown in ringing a bell, and the temper of the ringer is often disclosed in its tintinnabulations.

‘You must go: that is the Brescian student, Veronica,’ said Beldia.

‘I cannot; you know that, signorina,’ said the serving woman crossly. ‘Who is to do my work? All the washing up, and the ironing? Three o’clock now, and the days getting so short there is hardly room to turn round in them.’

‘Go and open the door, and show the stranger in,’ said Beldia. ‘He can amuse himself amongst the books till my father is free.’

Veronica went, grumbling; she was always reduced to obedience when her

young mistress spoke with that tone of decision. Beldia went to her own chamber. It was a little narrow place, with a grated window looking only on the red-brick, moss-grown tiles of the houses at the back of the tower; but it was picturesque and home-like, with a timber ceiling, and some pieces of old tapestry on its walls, and a little stair led up from it to the platform where her air-garden was; and swallows had nested under its cornice for more centuries than could be counted on the fingers of each hand; they were at this moment circling round and round above the house roof, arranging for that autumn flight which caused so much regret every year to Beldia. Even the bats, at the approach of winter, would withdraw themselves

into their homes in the belfries, and lofts, and old monastic turrets and cloisters round, and no winged creatures would remain there except the sparrows.

This afternoon she could give little thought to the birds or the flowers; she had received a letter from her brother, which she re-read in the solitude of her chamber, whilst her father was closeted with his visitor Vestuccio. It caused her long and painful thought, for it was one with which it seemed to her wholly impossible to comply.

Cirillo asked for money, money, money, as if money could be gathered off the stonecrop growing on the tiles, or the Madonna's herb flourishing in the crevices of the parapet.

‘My dearest child,’ he wrote to her,

‘I want two thousand francs at once. Get them from the old man for me, and post them as soon as you receive this. If I do not get them I shall be dishonoured in the sight of all my friends. You know, my little angel, what a man’s honour means.’

‘Yes,’ thought Beldia sadly; ‘it means to take all he wishes for from others, however he may pain or ruin them!’

The letter was long, the same arguments being again and again repeated in it with ingenuity and eloquence, but with that false ring in them all which comes from insincerity in the writer. The perception of this want of candour jarred on his sister, and hurt her as his clever and heartless impositions had often troubled her in their childhood; her

finer moral sense becoming conscious of them, whilst her love and affection turned in vain from them, striving resolutely to be blind.

The plea of honour offended her. It was a note he was too found of sounding. She tried with all her might to believe in the necessity which he pleaded ; but she could not. It was a necessity, perhaps, but one of coarser mould than the kind alleged. Well as she loved Cirillo, she knew that he constantly tampered with the exigencies of honour, and wore its yoke but lightly.

It was often difficult for her to make the weekly allowance which her father gave suffice for all their needs, and when each Saturday came round, and she discharged her household accounts, inclusive

of the woman's wage, there was no margin left. Besides which, she knew that large sums slipped away in the purchase of those multitudinous books which were for ever increasing : and the demands of her brother were numerous and unsparing upon the family purse. He was an artist of promise, but an extravagant one ; and he never denied himself any pleasure for so simple a reason as the mere fact that he had not the money to pay for it.

Cirillo never credited that his father was not rich ; he thought the librarian old - fashioned, prejudiced, abstemious, eccentric ; but he argued that no man would ever throw away such large sums on musty folios and decaying pamphlets, unless there were plenty of money be-



hind the bookshelves ; besides, there was always the land in the Casentino. He had never known any particulars of his father's means ; but he always supposed him to be well off, and spoke of him to all his Roman comrades as a rich old fellow with queer, miserly ways ; so that he never hesitated to worry and importune his sister to obtain whatever funds he wanted, and he wanted much often.

Many women are not good to men ; many women are niggardly, suspicious, foolish, jealous, and unkind in their relations with the men belonging to them ; but when they are good to such men they are very good, and Beldia was one of those. Her affection, patience, and comprehension were of infinite duration and elasticity. And she understood,

what few young women ever do understand, that the measure which was abundant for herself could not possibly content Cirillo. He was one year older than herself, and she had always been accustomed to obey him without criticism or hesitation; what he wished she never doubted must be accomplished.

She had read and re-read this letter, with pain and perplexity, when the voice of Veronica roused her, shouting up the shaft of the ladder-like staircase.

‘Signorina! the master says you are to come down into the library and see this strange gentleman; he himself has business with Vestuccio which will take him a half-hour or more. Come down, do you hear?’

Beldia heard, and obeyed, because it

was her habit to obey. She went without even casting a glance at herself in the little old silver-framed mirror which had belonged in the Trecento to some lady of the Brancalone race, and now served herself. Old men or young, good-looking or ill-favoured, they counted nothing to her; they were merely buyers or sellers of books; or else graceless robbers of her father's erudition.

The Brescian student was waiting in the inner back room; he had changed his clothes; he wore the velvet coat and broad-leaved hat common to artists; his crisp auburn hair and soft silken beard were carefully brushed. He had a look of distinction and grace, and an air which would have better suited the times in which the tower of Taddeo had

been built, than these in which the modest and dusty library of Ser Checchi was established in it ; it seemed to Beldia difficult to believe that he could be only a poor architect seeking his fortunes, and the doubt made her suspicious of, and cold to, him.

Old races have been too often impoverished and vulgarized, all their features are too often obliterated and stamped down into the common, meaningless, banal modern type, but still in Italy at times one meets the knights of Giorgione in Venice, the youths of Massaccio in Florence, the men and women of Sodoma in Siena, the forms and physiognomies of Signorelli in Orvieto, the children and the virgins of Correggio under the vines of Lom-

bardy ; still often there stands beneath a stone archway, or leans over a bridge parapet, or comes across a marble pavement, a figure which seems to have stepped down from the heroic pageants emblazoned on the storied walls, or to be the statue of the Discobolus or of the Faun, animated, and breathing once more the sunny air in which they were begotten.

The blood of Lombard nobles ran quick and warm in the veins of this artist, who owned nothing in the world except a little old house under the shadow of the Broletto where he had been born, the only relic left of what had once been a wide and princely heritage; and though he was but a poor wanderer who had to push his own way to fortune with his

pencil and compasses, if ever he reached it at all, he had the carriage of a knight and the head of a troubadour.

He now saluted Beldia gravely, apologizing for his too early arrival.

‘Nay, you are very punctual. It is my father who is engaged at the hour I named to you,’ she answered, not well pleased to be forced to attend to him. ‘He will be here, I think, before very long ; meantime, what works can I show you ?’

He gave some names at random, but they were of authors too recent to be found in the Ardiglione collection ; then, though he could ill afford to do so, he purchased some odd volumes of Giuseppe Vasi and some sheets of plans by Baldassare Peruzzi.

He felt ashamed to come here again and trouble this stately maiden for nothing, and again go away with empty hands. He leaned over the counters strewn with old books and old pamphlets of all kinds, and did his best to draw her on from architectural subjects into general conversation; but she was reserved by habit and from a secluded life, seldom going farther off her own doorstep than the church close by in the Piazza, and was so accustomed to treat the younger visitors who came thither with formality, that he did not make much progress with her until he spoke of the tower in which she dwelt. Then her eyes lightened, her lips smiled, her voice became full of feeling. She answered readily as to its architect, its age,

its traditions ; she told him the history of its building ; she grew eloquent over the legends attached to its loves and garlands, and the tale of the plague, which was associated with its shrine of the Madonna. She never tired of talking of her home, and of all it had seen and heard and known, and in him she found an eager listener, ready to share her enthusiasm and veneration for its dark and massive stones. In turn he told her of Brescia and Bergamo, and of his own little house there, once the mere loggia to the great palace owned by the Fontana family. Its arches had been filled in towards the beginning of the eighteenth century, and its columns had then been roofed, and its once stately frescoed beauty changed into a humble



dwelling-house such as it was still, and in which his mother now lived, a widow, all alone, pious, gentle, and cheerful, thinking ever of his graceless self in many sleepless nights and useless prayers.

He had succeeded in interesting his companion, when Ser Checchi at last appeared; a shadow on his calm features as of worried moments lately passed, but ready to enter into any subjects, classical or mediæval, which it might please his customer to suggest. It is at once the joy and the peril of scholars, like artists, that their mundane and prosaic interests are immediately laid aside and forgotten, if the impersonal topics which attract them are mooted in their presence. To them the abstract far outweighs and

eclipses the practical ; and to the scholar's, as to the artist's, mind, the impersonal is so infinitely greater than the personal that the claims of the latter are cast aside for the charms of the former, without a moment's hesitation or contrition. Whatever the business was on which Vestuccio had come to the old librarian, its vexatious recollections were now put aside and forgotten the moment that the new-comer questioned him as to the place of burial of Il Magnifico, a disputed point amongst Tuscan scholars.

They conversed long and cordially, with that satisfaction which comes from mutual tastes and opinions, whilst Beldia listened, working at a piece of sewing which she kept in a drawer under the

desk, to fill up her idle moments in the book-room.

She perceived reluctantly, but clearly, the use which many unscrupulous visitors made so frequently of her father; the avidity with which they drove the sharp pickaxe of their minor intelligence into the gold-mine of his long-amassed knowledge, and took thence all they needed to make their paltry storehouse rich.

He, in the single-hearted devotion of the humanist, out of the generous abundance of the enthusiast, delighted to aid, to encourage, to enlighten, to assist all who came to him; was blind to all the petty larcenies by which he was robbed of information and experience, of authority and data, while the

gems stolen from his store were set up in the caps of these beardless knaves, without acknowledgment or thanks.

Many an article in newspaper and review was brilliant with the borrowed learning which he had unconsciously supplied to some young scribbler of the public press, and more than one ambitious aspirant to public life had forced himself into notice in high quarters by the antiquarian and philological investigations opened out by the elder scholar, which had been innocently shown and liberally lent to him.

The old man in his book-room, with the sun-rays from the window, or the lamp from the table, shed on his benign and noble countenance, felt like Erasmus or Boethius amongst the pupils of a

golden time, as these young men pressed around him, plying him with questions, listening to his suggestions, putting down his dates and judgments with their pencils. He was touched, flattered, mollified, and thought that those of his contemporaries who complained of the rudeness and indifference and cynicism of the younger generation did it wrong.

But Beldia, sitting apart, silent, over her ledgers or her linen, saw what he did not see, overheard what he did not hear, and understood the motives with which these callous and scornful youngsters affected so much deference to age and so much desire of instruction.

There was one amongst them in especial whom she distrusted and de-

tested. He was a young lawyer, by name Pampilio Querci; he was clever, cunning, and of an ambition reaching far beyond the desk and stool of an attorney's office; he had mental power, and had education enough to be able to estimate and admire the vast accumulation of Ser Checchi's learning; and he had skill enough to send his own little bucket of a mind deep down again and again into the profound wells of the librarian's intellect, and to draw up the waters of knowledge, which he knew how to pour forth again thinly and carefully, as if brought from his own especial springs.

Again and again could Beldia recognise her father's erudition, so generously and imprudently displayed, retailed by

this young man in the public press, without acknowledgment of or allusion to its giver, in papers signed ‘Lex et Lux,’ which was the press-name of Pampilio Querci. Once or twice she had pointed out these articles to her father ; but he, in whose character there were mingled simplicity and vanity, had waived them aside impatiently.

‘ If the youngster can find pleasure in these abstruse questions, it is well, it is laudable,’ he answered to her ; ‘ let us not check his zeal, my daughter. After all, the fount of learning is open to high and low, to old and young. Let who will drink thereof. God forbid that I should send such away thirsty.’

And Beldia felt with a pang how noble he was, and how foolish ; how

liberal and how unwise. He set open his jar of honey from Mount Parnassus, and let these flies and wasps come round and upon it, and they sucked their fill, and stung him as their only thanks.

But she could do nothing to make him perceive and believe this, and the antiquarian and philological articles continued to be compiled and printed, signed 'Lex et Lux,' until they attracted the attention of the Minister of Education, who said to the Prefect of Florence that the young writer of them must be a brilliant scholar, and had better be looked after and secured to the interest of the Government with some good official place, lest he should be taken away by the clericals, for whom he seemed to have a leaning, Querci



knowing well how to run with the hare and hunt with the hounds.

Beldia, who saw his drift, and guessed the reward he tried to obtain, was impatient of the sight of the lean, small, spruce figure, and the pale, aquiline, demure profile of the young attorney, and begrudged all the hours which her father wasted on him, all the volumes he borrowed for an indefinite time, and often forgot to return, and all the information which he angled for so dexterously and absorbed so ravenously.

Therefore she looked now with prejudice and ill-favour upon the entry of the Brescian architect, seeing in him only another of his younger generation which used and abused her father's good-nature. To allow students to

transcribe from and consult manuscripts and folios in the book-room was not the way to sell books and make money by them ; this the sober and practical side of her temperament told her, and a volume or a pamphlet was indeed hardly ever sold out of the thousands filling the shelves and cumbering the floors. It pleased Ser Checchi that this should be so, to see any work go away in the hands of a stranger was always painful to him ; if it were a rare and valuable work, to sell it was to him like selling a child in bondage. There were hundreds of books in his tower which he had purchased in the days of his youth, and that they should remain there all these years was delightful to him. But they did not fill his purse by

remaining there, and the additional purchases which he was continually adding to them drained it.

‘Another young man to read, and smile, and listen, and go away laden with borrowed learning, which he will sell to editors and publishers,’ thought Beldia, glancing impatiently at the auburn head of the Lombard stranger. But she could not refuse to admit that the newcomer had a different physiognomy to the bloodless face of Pampilio Querci, and he left off his studies to choose some plates of Palladio’s plans, which he again paid for, honestly, and at once, without trying to obtain an abatement in their price.

He was of a manlier, finer, bolder type than the undersized young scribes

and quill-drivers who came thither to suck the brain of her father. There was something daring, chivalrous, candid, and adventurous in his person and features and manners, before which her suspicions and antipathies melted away despite herself.

He asked frankly if he might return there.

‘You have so many volumes of architectural and mechanical drawings,’ he added, ‘I may find so much here that I have sought for vainly in my native town. But I am well aware that it is most unfair to expect to use a private bookseller’s collection as though it were a public library, to be studied in at pleasure.’

Before she could reply, Ser Checchi

intervened with his benignant smile and his grave nod of the head.

‘That is a very honest and thoughtful scruple, young sir,’ he answered. ‘But it is a needless scruple here. I am delighted if you or anyone can find any profit in what I am fortunate enough to have gathered about me. My poor place is wholly at your service, at any hour of the day.’

Beldia reddened with vexation. There were already so many of these idlers and thieves, who choked up what little space there was left free in the book-rooms, and wasted her time, and the boy’s, and her father’s. But at least those frequenters of the place were townsfolk, youths and old men well known from their birth up in their

native streets; it seemed natural, it might be only proper, to afford them what advantages were to be secured there; but this was a stranger, a foreigner, a Lombard. There could be no need or obligation to open wide house and heart to him like this.

But Ser Checchi took no heed of her imploring glances, nor of the restraining touch with which she gently pulled the skirt of his long coat. He reiterated his invitation to come and study, and the Brescian accepted it with cordiality and gratitude; and as the latter at last left the library, carrying his Palladian engravings with him, the old man looked after his tall figure approvingly.

‘A well-made and well-mannered youth,’ he said with satisfaction. ‘They

grow fine manhood in the north. Child, did you mark how eager he was concerning the Domenican Fathers as printers at Rifredi? Let him come; let him come; if there be anything here which can profit him, he is heartily welcome to it.'

Beldia sighed.

She had heard those generous words spoken so many times, and she had never known any gratitude shown for them from those for whose benefit they were spoken.

'An accomplished man and a modest one,' added Ser Checchi, turning over the volumes used by his visitor; 'I shall be glad to afford him any possible opportunities for study that he may be able to find here. Mind that you make

him welcome in my absence, Beldia, and let him search for all the dates and authorities which he may wish to find.'

'Certainly, father,' she answered, a little unwillingly. 'But no one will ever buy books if you allow all your visitors to come and glean all they want here without paying for the privilege.'

'What a speech for my daughter to make!' cried Ser Checchi, displeased and scandalized. 'Let the State be vile enough to put a tax on art and learning, as it does at its libraries and galleries, I will never grudge the free use of my book-shelves to any serious scholar.'

'But they will not buy if they can turn over a hundred volumes for nothing.'



‘ Perhaps they cannot buy. Perhaps they are honest and earnest lovers of learning who are very scantily supplied with this world’s goods. Shall I grudge them a ray from my poor lantern on their path to help their search ? Shall I refuse them a crust from my cupboard, when they are honestly hungering for the truth ? Fie, fie ! for shame, my child ! You have not lived amongst the eloquence of the dead to hide such sordid thoughts within your breast ? Surely, surely not, Beldia ? ’

She was silent.

She was too docile to contradict her father, and too generous not to appreciate his generosity ; but she knew what all these volumes cost, and she knew what rent and taxes cost, and she knew

that the library of the tower was kept open year after year at a dead loss.

She knew, also, enough of commerce to know that trade cannot be carried on successfully on such romantic principles as her father's. But he, vaguely sensible of the disagreement implied by her silence, waxed warmer and warmer on the theme.

‘Who knows but that some one of these youths may not be on the highway to immortality, though he look to our purblind eyes but a needy idler?’ he said vehemently. ‘Was not Cervantes poor? was not Tasso deemed a madman? was not Giotto a shepherd on the hills? was not Camoens sold for a slave? Has not Genius been impoverished, and starved, and persecuted in every age of the

world? If we help these stumbling feet on to even the lowest rung of the ladder of renown—nay, if we do what is better still, happier still, help to confirm the bias of a youth to the choice of the arts of peace and of light, instead of the pursuit of gain or the lust of war—is it not some little good done for the Muses, as they were used to say, for Humanity as men say now? Ah! my dear, surely, surely, in learning, yet more than in life, what is done to the least of these is as if it were done to Deity itself.’

Beldia’s eyes grew soft and suffused as they dwelt on her father’s face, which was lighted up with the radiance of a high and impersonal passion. Her heart ached at this noble and guileless enthusiasm. She knew how men traded on

it to their own base profit. She knew that it was not genius, but cunning, which came there to glean the gold of his knowledge and kindness; that it was not the ingenuous youth of a Platonic Academy which sought his counsels and teachings, but the keen, sharp, narrow wits of modern youngsters pilfering to prosper. She knew how his ideas were stolen, his culture was borrowed, his library shelves were ransacked by the journalists, writers, professors, attorneys, and the like, who came to him to carry off a harvest of quotation and knowledge which they would have been incapable of gleaning for themselves.

She knew this well; it was why she received all younger men so coldly, and only smiled on the aged scholars.

But how was she to say this to him? How damp that good faith, and lower that exaltation which had carried on into old age the beautiful ignorance and confidence of youth?

## CHAPTER IV.

SHE turned the subject by an allusion to Vestuccio.

‘Did Messer Aurelio vex you to-day, father?’ she asked him. ‘I thought you looked disturbed at his arrival. Was his business so very urgent that he need have come at dinner-time?’

Her father’s face clouded.

‘Vestuccio came about a financial matter,’ he said evasively. ‘He is a careful man. It always vexes me to lay aside study for practical matters. Busi-

ness is Martha, and study is Mary. I have dwelt with Mary all my days, and walked with her in green and shady places; I am ill fitted for the noise and clatter, however useful and well meant, which her ruder sister makes about her work.'

'Could not I see to this matter, whatever it is, for you?' asked Beldia wistfully.

'Certainly not,' said her father peremptorily. 'Buy your marketings, my love, and your linen, and your sugar and spice, but leave graver business to me. You are Mary and Martha in one person, I know, but that is not a reason for overstepping your duties. Attend to your daisy-roots on the roof, and your pigeons, and sweet herbs, and do

not offer me counsel until I ask for it.'

'I did not mean any forwardness or officiousness,' she murmured, distressed and ashamed at his reproof.

'No, no ; you meant nothing but what was right,' he said kindly. 'You are only too anxious to spare me trouble, I know. Women should confine themselves to household cares. Now go to your room, or out-of-doors, if you will. I will attend to the library this afternoon, and I am expecting Don Gervasio and Massimo. We are in doubt still if we have read aright that passage in Avicenna. It is very obscure.'

Don Gervasio was a priest, the vicar of a small church near, and Massimo was the baptismal name of an aged



teacher of Greek and Arabic, who was the bosom friend of Ser Checchi. With these two cronies he spent the happiest hours of every year, re-reading disputed passages, questioning received readings, searching obscure authorities, and familiarizing themselves with the forgotten authors whose bones were dust.

Beldia retired, as he bade her do; but not to work or to amuse herself. She had all the household needs upon her head and hands, all those daily and small labours which go together to make up the guidance of a house, and upon the discharge of which, well or ill done, depends the comfort or discomfort of that house.

Men rarely understand the labour

which this involves, and have neither compassion nor gratitude for the efforts which surround them with creature-comforts and create around them a serene domestic atmosphere. Like other men, Ser Checchi believed that his house ordered itself, and thought of his daughter's life as of one long holiday of perfect and continual ease.

He never dreamed of the constant supervision by which the naturally noisy and careless servant was kept quiet and made careful, the constant attention by which the dusky old chambers were kept fresh and sweet, the constant economy by which the best possible was obtained and the least possible spent, and the constant industry with which linen was repaired, conserves

were made, accounts were kept, and stores were husbanded. Beldia knew that the means of her father were not large, and that his habits were costly from liberality of temper, and the absence of mind of a man whose thoughts were with the dead rather than with his butcher, and his baker, and his tallow-chandler. Keeping the accounts, indeed, as she did, she saw that the commerce of the library was almost at a standstill—that few buyers ever came thither, and that the purchases of books were a hundred times in excess of the demand for them. But as the books of which she saw the entry were all bought cheaply at sales, and those more costly purchases were unexplained to her, the real price paid for such additions re-

mained unknown to her, and the outlay which the library caused was, as far as she knew, to be placed at a low figure. She thought it rather her father's hobby than his trade, and was not as uneasy as she would have been had she known the true price of the beautiful and ancient copies which were being every now and then added to the already overflowing sea of literature which surrounded her. The love of books was such a holy and noble passion that it seemed to her impossible any harm should ever come out of it.

Yet she could not but perceive that her father was often preoccupied, often troubled, and received visits and letters which caused him perplexities of which he explained nothing to her ; he did not

even permit her to allude to them. And Vestuccio—she did not understand them, but she was afraid of his relations with Vestuccio.

The prosperous citizen who bore this name had been born of poor parents, rope-makers and sail-menders at a dirty but romantic village nestled under a cliff near a large seaport on the Italian Riviera. He had run about half naked in the sun and sand and surf, and grown strong and healthy on his diet of fish and rye-bread. He had made friends with the skippers of brigs at the port near, and they had given him odds and ends of foreign trifles, which he sold about the streets with such pretty shells and seaweed, or bits of agate and cornelian, as he had picked up along the

shore. He was a clever, agile, merry child, with an engaging smile and bright blue eyes; and people bought of him because he asked them so nicely, his white teeth shining, his brown curls blowing, and his tray slung in front of his little bare chest.

Most boys would have either spent the pence thus gained on food and drink or carried them home to their mothers. He did neither; he saved them up and put them by, and, when he had enough to do so, lent out little sums to his companions or to the fishermen and mariners, and did it so well that he multiplied his pence very quickly, and yet, strange to say, never made an enemy, and none grudged him his gains.

Little by little, the pence and the

francs swelled till they became a goodly sum, and Aurelio, now become a youth of eighteen, opened a little shop in the seaport town—a little den under an arch—where coral and shells and such cheap bits of Oriental finery as he could buy, half damaged, off the quays, were put together in the darkness; and he himself sat or stood, ever smiling, behind the board which served him as a counter.

To buy something of 'Rello, as he was called, became the fashion with the seafaring folks and their sweethearts; and many of the sailors brought him pretty outlandish articles, ivories and parrots and ostrich feathers, and little jade idols, in exchange for the good tobacco and brandy which he smuggled

in for them undetected ; and at his little cabin the seafaring men, native and foreign, met the buxom blowsy women of their hearts, and he could turn an honest penny by helping on such amorous intercourse.

After a few years of this small trading he had realized enough to leave the seaport, with its disreputable associations, and quietly and sagaciously he established himself in Florence, in a very modest manner, as a seller of curios and foreign trifles ; his old comrades, the sailors, still often put him in the way of bargains from the east and west, and he was always cordial and unassuming, and content with a moderate percentage on what he sold.

It was a humble little dusky corner,



hardly bigger than a dog-kennel, but in it were sometimes found really good and strange things, and before many more years had passed over his head he was able to move from this obscure dwelling to a large although unpretending shop in the Piazza della Madonna, over the door of which he had painted in bold lettering, 'Aurelio Vestuccio, Antiquario,' where, in a little office in a back-court, under a plane-tree, he did much business beside his ostensible traffic in majolica and bronzes and old furniture. His career was made.

'All gained by hard work and honest dealing,' he said, with a glow of pride and self-respect. He had married the daughter of a tallow-chandler with a round little dowry of her own, and had

put out her little fortune in his business with the same prudence and sagacity with which, as a child, he had sold shell and seaweed. He had always a pleasant, good-humoured, clean-shaved face, and was always willing to do anyone a good turn. He had become popular and respected in the town; and, from the dilettante who wanted a piece of old stamped leather, to the embarrassed tradesman who wanted a loan of twenty pounds, everyone who required something quickly found out, and cheerfully arranged for, went to the little office under the plane-tree, where Aurelio Vestuccio was to be seen from nine till four.

He was a model of what industry and thrift can make of a man by the

time he is forty, though all the circumstances of his early life had been against him, and he had had no advantages except his shrewd and cautious mind and his pleasant and politic manner. Many half-naked boys sell shells and seaweed on many shores ; but to few of them is it given to be born with a brain as quick as mercury, a clever tongue which can chatter constantly yet reveal nothing, and a heart as hard as a nether millstone. This last possession was the most useful of all his many gifts from nature, but it would have availed nothing without the ever-watching, and ever-bright, intelligence behind it.

Many people have hard hearts, but not many have long heads : he had both,

and he had also a most admirable cordiality and simplicity of manner which stood him in good stead. Then, he was known to be a good father and husband; and on Sunday, at noon, might be seen listening to the military music in the Piazza of San Marco, or in the Piazzone of the Cascine, with a tribe of nice-looking and neatly-clad children about him, hostages and warrants of his many civic virtues.

Ser Checchi had known and helped him from the earliest years of his establishment in his first modest little shop; and Vestuccio had ingratiated himself with the old scholar by putting in his way many an old pamphlet or volume which had come under his hand in his various expeditions to far-off villages or castles

in the mountains north and south in search of curiosities.

Some seven years before the arrival of the Lombard student in the city, an incident had occurred which had brought the bric-à-brac seller and the librarian in closer commerce and communication.

Ser Checchi, when at Antella, was much given to roaming over the hills and valleys of the Casentino in the summer season in search of old books, such as lie forgotten and neglected in many a sacristy cupboard where the good priest is more learned in village news and wine diseases than in the value of *Horæ* and *Evangeliarium*. Though he walked apparently with feebleness, because his shoulders were bowed and

his gait was slow, he could cover many a mile without fatigue, with no steed except his ebony-handled stick, and no companion except the white dog Folko, who always went into the country when his master did.

In one of these country rambles he grew thirsty, and paused to ask for a draught of water at the forge of a blacksmith called Io. The forge was high up in the hills, and the anvil and hammer had little work to do, but the smith was also in a small way a landowner and farmer, having inherited part, and bought part, of the arable land and of the pine-wood around and about his smithy. Io was a well-known man in the district, by name Iorio Lencioni, and was a familiar acquaintance of Ser

Checchi's, whom he now welcomed with delight, and for whom he insisted on opening a flask of old Chianti, which his visitor, sorely to his distress, insisted for his part on mixing with spring water.

It was three o'clock, and the June day was hot. Ser Checchi was tired, for he had strolled more miles than he had counted along the fragrant hillside, where nightingales sang under the bay thickets and the yellow gorse was blossoming and the wild rose.

‘You are fatigued, sir; rest for an hour or two,’ said the blacksmith, a big, good-tempered, middle-aged man, with his reaping-hook in his hand and his shirt-sleeves rolled up to his shoulder.

‘Thanks to you, I will do so,’ said Ser Checchi ; ‘at least, if you will promise me to go back to your field-work, for your corn is over-ripe, and I fear me that there is rain in the air for this evening, and your grain is not half cut.’

‘Sit and rest, then, and we will go and finish cutting the corner field,’ said Iorio to him ; ‘and, by the way, Ser Checchi, there is an old chest which you may like to look over—there are papers and such-like in it. I found it under a heap of old hay in the loft. It has been there, I be bound, as many years as the house is old. We hoped there was something good in it ; but there was nothing but an odd lot of books, so we threw them back again,



being spited not to have laid our hand heartily on something better. You are welcome to it if there be any paper or book as may please you ; they are only a pack of rubbish, I fear—copybooks and ciphering-books and the like ; but if you care to look over them the house is yours, and we will get, by your leave, to our reaping.’

Ser Checchi thanked him and looked longingly towards a dusty, worm-eaten old wooden chest of solid nutwood, with a coat-of-arms carved heavily on its lid, and with rusty iron handles.

Old books !—the sound of the word was as sweet to him as the promise of bridal gifts to a maiden, or winter toys to a child by the fireside. They might most probably be of no value, but old

volumes were always of interest, were they only records of household expenditure or of clerkly memoranda.

A few minutes later the whole family trooped out through the open doorway to go to finish their reaping, even the small children clinging to the women's skirts and eager to be taken to the field, to lie and sleep amongst the warm wheat whilst the sickles of their elders were at work. Ser Checchi and Folko were left alone in the blacksmith's kitchen, with the sunshine streaming in through the green tracery of the window and the old clock drowsily ticking the minutes in a corner.

Ser Checchi slumbered a little while in the heat and the stillness and the fragrant hill air, the dog outstretched at

his feet. Then he shook himself awake, drank a little more of the watered wine, and stooped over the chest, which the smith had considerably drawn close to the window for his easier inspection. There were quantities of yellow documents written in crabbed characters—household and farm books for the most part, belonging to the seventeenth century, records of the credit and debit of the large estate of which the house and lands now owned by Iorio had formed a portion. They were large books, massive, heavy, covering the expenditure of well-nigh a century. Ser Checchi, with fatigue, lifted them up one after the other over the tall sides of the chest. They interested him, like everything which belonged to a past age and had

been written by dead hands, but to examine them thoroughly would take days and weeks, and he had many similar ones at home. Beneath all these ancient folios were, however, a few bound volumes lying under numbers of loose pages and deeds, which all appeared to have reference to what had once been the great estate of a great family now extinct.

He took these volumes out and brushed from them tenderly the dust, the dirt, and the seeds of hay with which they were covered. They were all books of the same date, the seventeenth century, to which the ledgers and household books belonged; there were prayer-books, lives of saints, copies of ecclesiastical works, in all some dozen

volumes, none of any rarity or especial mark, none of any uncommon binding or unusual typography. But one volume much longer and larger than the others, with a binding of another epoch, caught his instructed eyes where it lay in a corner of the desk, more than half hidden under the loose and dusty hay-seed.

His hands trembled as he drew it forth. His sight swam as he opened its pages. His hands shook, his whole person quivered, his eyes were full of longing and light; they were the eyes of a man of twenty years old.

Learned in such things as he was, he knew its antiquity and its value at a glance. To find such a treasure mouldering neglected in a dusty chest in a

cottage had been the dream of his whole life. Indignation, amaze, awe, delight, all held him breathless and entranced before the worm-eaten bench on which it lay. Oh, how happy the scribe who had penned it, though long ago his hand had crumbled to ashes !

The sun poured in through the strings of flowering beans which were running up the window, and the gentle air blew the yellow dry leaves to and fro irreverently. He remained on his knees before the manuscript, gazing with a lover's ardour and a devotee's devotion at the marvellous fine regular lines of the penman, the serried ranks of this black letter, in which not a blot, nor a deviation, nor an erasure was visible. Oh, the marvel of it ! Look what the

handwriting of men had become since the days of printing ! Who wrote now what would be clear and beautiful for ever as this was ? What would the sprawled, careless, hurried, blotted caligraphy of the present age tell men, as this work told them, of the beauty and holiness of ardour, of perseverance, and of labour, where the hand was but the instrument of the soul ?

It was a Codex of the ‘*Divina Commedia*,’ dated under the colophon as finished at Ravenna in May, 1320.

There are but few such in the world, and those few are numbered and known to all bibliophiles, like the folios of Shakespeare. To have discovered one other was to a lover and student of books what the discovery of a new

world was to navigators of old—an ecstasy, an honour, a miracle, an intoxication of happiness.

He examined the parchment, the capitals, the writing, the headpiece, the colophon, the binding, which was of leather much eaten and gnawed by mice, with some unpolished cornelians, cut and mounted on silver, on its clasps; he scarcely breathed as he bent over it, whilst the full sun fell warm and golden on to these pages, which had once, like enough, been touched and seen by Dante's self. There could be no question of its age and its authenticity; indeed, the finding of it in such a place was proof enough of these. How many other treasures there are, doubtless, lying unknown in attic and cellar, in



granary and wood-house in remote country places, where even the tireless feet of the collector and the dealer never wander, and the wand of the modern Hermes of the book-mart is unknown !

The binding was of a much later date, and the folio had been probably laid away by some scholar, when the blast of trumpet or the smoke of torches had told of the tide of war rolling up towards that calm hillside, and there it had remained in its obscurity ever since, visited only by the mice, who had nibbled its edges and peeled its leather here and there.

For the first time in all his pure and upright life, a great temptation to an act of dishonour, of dishonesty, assailed

him as he knelt there before it. No one knew that it was there; no one around him even beholding it would see in it anything more than an old book, quite worthless, only fit, perhaps, to be torn up to kindle a fire or to stop a leak in a cask. Nothing could be simpler, nothing more easy, than to put it in his pocket or take it away under his arm. No one on that hillside would ever know or care. Unless his learning enlightened their ignorance, no one of the people around him would ever dream that this old brown volume, moth-eaten and mice-gnawed, would be worth its weight in gold to the libraries of great cities and great men. There was not a soul near, not even in sight; all the family were out in the fields;

there was not even a child asleep in the cradle, nor a dog, save his own by the threshold. He had only to walk out of the open doorway along the grass paths of the hillside towards his own home, and carry the precious manuscript with him.

Never was any temptation made more easy and more alluring to an innocent soul !

He bent over the Codex, his hands pressed around it lovingly as a woman's hands round the body of her child ; his was no cold appetite of a dryasdust, but a passion infinitely tender, and yearning, and even romantic ; beside all that old books said to him as a scholar, they awoke his affections and his imaginations ; to hold thus, what likely enough

Dante once had held, thrilled him to his utmost soul; he could never see a volume which had weathered centuries, a manuscript which had been written in other ages, without a strong emotion as of tears.

He would have given half the few years remaining to him to have had this one in his own possession, safe locked under his own keys; and to so possess it he had nothing to do but to put it under his arm and walk quietly away down the hillside; no one would ever have known.

It was so intense a temptation that the dew stood on his temples, and the blue veins swelled in his throat, as he knelt there, his hands about the old dark rusty cover of it. There it had lain so

long, and no eyes but his could have recognised it for what it was. It was his own by all right of affinity, all title of sympathy. What was it to those who owned it?

He stayed there gazing on it so long that his limbs grew cramped and stagnated, and he lost all sense of nerve and pulse whilst the sun sank down out of sight behind the mountain afar off in the west.

The sound of voices laughing and talking and singing came to his ear as the reapers approached from the fields. Then he arose slowly, for his knees were stiff and bruised by the bricks on which he had so long knelt.

He took the volume in his hand, and

crossed the kitchen, and met the peasants at the threshold.

‘My friend ! my friend !’ he said to the blacksmith. ‘Here is a treasure I have found for you in that which you thought was a mere heap of rubbish. This volume is worth its weight in gold, if it be truly that which I think. To-morrow we will go together into the city and have it fully appraised.’

Iorio drew near with startled round eyes, alight with joy and covetousness, and the women with him pressed close also in excitement and wonder, expecting to see some vessels of gold and silver or some jewelled pyx or cross.

‘An old book ! a leather book !’ said the smith’s wife with derision and disappointment. ‘You are joking, Ser

Checchi ! You are so fond of books that your head gets turned about them. Any rubbish bewitches you.'

'You mistake,' said Ser Checchi almost harshly, for his temptation to say otherwise was almost greater than his strength. 'Take my word on a matter of which you are yourself utterly ignorant. This book is so old, and of such a nature, that it is extremely valuable. Keep it carefully all the night, and to-morrow I will take you to those in the town who will confirm what I say. You will learn from them precisely its worth. Only, good man,' he added, as he clasped the volume in both hands and gazed at it with swimming, reverent eyes, 'if that value be what I can pay you, you will let me become the pur-

chaser of it at its due price, will you not?’

The smith, brawny, bare-legged, bare-armed, sunburnt till he was almost black, stared sheepishly at the volume, which to him looked worth no more than, nay, not half as much as, a clod of good brown earth. The other men, with the women and children, were all gaping with wide-open mouths, and nudging one another, and whispering that it was commonly said that the good Ser Checchi was in his dotage on certain matters.

‘You will find what I say is true,’ said the old man abruptly; ‘and—and—you will give me the preference over other buyers, if the price come within my means?’



‘About what might be the price?’ asked Iorio in a shamefaced, awed tone, the avarice of the Tuscan peasant beginning to stir in him at the idea of a possible gain.

‘That I would not rather say, since I intend to be, if possible, a buyer,’ replied Ser Checchi a little austerely, for what he had done had cost him a sharp effort, and he suffered at the idea of this precious treasure-trove going away from his own hands, even for this one short summer night.

‘Keep it as the apple of your eye,’ he said to the smith, and reluctantly relinquished it to the dirty rough hand outstretched to take it.

‘Lord ! It’s been in that chest, I will be bound, for hundreds and hundreds of

years,' said the smith, staring confusedly down on this dingy, mouse-nibbled leathern folio, of which such wonders were told him.

'I will meet you at the foot of the hill at daybreak,' said Ser Checchi, hastily averting his eyes from the sight of the volume in those ignorant and impious hands.

Then he turned his back on them and went down the steep grass path under the olive boughs, through the sheaves of wheat.

' "Lead us not into temptation," ' he thought. 'Who has not need to say that?'

All the night he could not sleep for the memory of the manuscript confided to the stupid care of a peasant ignorant and contemptuous of its value, and it

made him restless and ashamed to feel how nearly, how closely, the temptation to secrecy had assailed him.

‘We are wretched creatures, and can find fair sophisms to cover all our evil-doing,’ he thought sadly as he lay wide awake looking at the clouds sweeping slowly past his moonlit casement, and hearing the prolonged and harmonious call of the scops owl through the shadows.

In the morning he kept his word, and went down with the blacksmith into the city, Iorio wholly incredulous, but carrying with him, wrapped in a bit of cotton stuff which his wife had given him, the dingy volume which in his soul he utterly despised.

After long and careful examination

the book was pronounced by those most competent to judge on such matters to be undoubtedly one of the very earliest copies of the great poem extant, worth many thousand francs in private sale, likely to be sold for its weight in gold in an auction-room.

The smith was stupefied. That a common old book, all nibbled and dog-eared as it looked, should be likely to realize such a vast sum of money seemed to turn the very world topsy-turvy to him.

‘Sure the wisest men are the biggest fools,’ he said to his wife, who had come with him to see that he should not be cheated. ‘An old black book all in gnawed leather ! Could any soul in his senses care for it ?’

‘Well, they do, and it’s no business of yours to put them out of grace with it,’ said his helpmeet. ‘Take time by the forelock, and the cat when she jumps.’

‘But Ser Checchi might have kept it to himself, and we been none the wiser!’

‘Ay, ay,’ said his wife. ‘The good man always was three parts daft, or he’d have kept his tongue behind his teeth.’

‘Iorio,’ said Ser Checchi at that moment, ‘you see what I said is true. You have heard from sound judges the value of your volume. Now, what will you do with it? Will you offer it to the State, or will you let me have it, or will you wait your chance to meet with some great fancier and collector of these things?’

He spoke quietly, but his hands

shook as they had done when he had first touched the precious manuscript, and his eyes dwelt longingly on it where it lay wrapped in the piece of flowered cotton.

‘Why, Ser Checchi, sure the volume is half yours already, for you found it,’ began Iorio, who was a simple and amiable man, but he was checked suddenly by his wife, who said quickly :

‘Of course, sir, we would sooner sell it to you than to any mortal creature, so crazy fond of these things as you are, and no offence meant ; but we are very poor people, as your honour knows, and with nine children and times so bad and taxes what they are, we cannot follow just the first wish of our hearts, sir, and the book these gentlemen seem to say is

worth ten times its weight in gold and more.'

'Nay, nay—not so much as that,' murmured Iorio.

Ser Checchi was very pale. He saw that the folio was slipping from his hands. His stanch rectitude forced him to admit the truth of what the woman had said.

'You may realize a fancy price by it, certainly,' he answered; 'but to make one of those sensational prices you must wait the propitious season, and find the willing purchaser. If you like to sell it to me for the small sum which the public libraries here would give you, I will buy it at that. If you prefer to take your chance, you must wait till you find your rich amateur.'

But amateurs do not come up in your hills. You will have to trust to some dealer to find you one, and you may trust unwisely.'

Iorio opened his mouth to speak, but his wife spoke before him.

'Quite so, sir, we can see that,' she said, taking up the volume in its flowered wrapper. 'But a waiting race is always a safe race to ride. We will wait about this rare book. It lay long years enough in the old walnut chest, and it can go back there, and no harm done. I will clean up the red stones on it a bit, and we will ponder well what is best to be done. I saw Vestuccio just now, and he spoke of our sending it to Paris. But there's time enough for Paris, say I.'



‘You have shown it to Vestuccio?’ asked Ser Checchi, with anxious lines on his brow, his eyes resting longingly on the treasure where it lay in the woman’s stout arms.

‘He had heard of it somehow already,’ replied the smith with some confusion, ‘and asked to be allowed to look at it. “Ser Checchi would give you a barrow-load of gold plate for it,” says he; but you know, sir, he always has a merry way. One never knows if he be in joke or in earnest.’

‘I have no gold plate to give, nor silver,’ said Ser Checchi sadly. ‘Truly, to those who honour the things of the spirit the volume were worth more than many tons’ weight of either.’

He murmured the last words rather

to himself than to the man and woman. His heart was heavy. He had dealt by them with all candour, loyalty, and honour. He had hoped that they would show some sensibility of what he had done. He offered the fair library price; it seemed to him hard that they would not give it him for that, when but for him they would never have known that it was theirs at all.

‘Good-day,’ he said to them with a swelling heart, and turned away. He was proud, and he was, like all sensitive people, quickly rebuffed.

Their colloquy had taken place in the piazza of San Lorenzo, in front of the warehouse where there are sold terra-cotta images, and flower-pots, and lemon-vases. The cart waited for the

smith and his wife, with the patient horse in the dusty shafts dropping his nose over his bag of chaff and shaking his worsted tassels. Ser Checchi went on towards the Canto di' Nelli with slow steps and head hung down. He longed inexpressibly for the Dante, with that love of the bibliophile which has in it all the tenderness of a lover, all the eagerness of a child, all the devotion of a slave, all the hunger of a miser. He had found it, he had aroused it from its slumber beneath the dust of centuries, and restored it to the light of earth, and yet he could have no share in it. A peasant, who could not tell what its initial letters meant, could bear it away from him, held in her stout stubborn arms, and covered with her unlovely

cotton chintz. He did not repent him of his honesty, because he was an integrally honest man. But he felt, what honest men feel sadly often, that honesty costs very dear.

‘It’s cruel to take it from him, when he loves the senseless old parcel so, God knows why,’ whispered Iorio, with an uneasy sense that there must be something uncanny in the volume of which he knew nothing.

‘Do not you be soft,’ said his wife ; ‘softness never earned a penny yet.’

But the smith did not assent. He was a good-hearted man, though his means were small and his cupidity was excited by the idea of these vast sums circling in the air above this strange, darksome old volume. He

overtook Ser Checchi with a few quick strides, while his wife vainly screamed to him from the seat to which she had climbed in the cart.

‘Ser Checchi,’ he whispered, ‘if it be really that your heart is set on this book, why, it would be a shame that you should not have it, if you will pay the price the dealers here would give. You pay that, sir, and you shall have it. No, do not say any more now. My woman is looking after us; the women are always unreasoning and niggard. I would give it to you, sir,’ he added, ‘give it you and right welcome, for nothing; but a man with a wife and children is always a man bound; he cannot help himself when he is bid to do dirty things.’

Then he left the old librarian's side as quickly as he had overtaken him, and got up into his cart.

‘You have never promised him anything?’ said the woman with suspicious anger.

‘Set your mind easy,’ said Iorio curtly. ‘You’ve made me as close and as nasty as yourself. I never did a thing I was right-down ashamed of before to-day, but to-day I have.’

Ser Checchi's heart had given a great leap of joy, and the dusty stones of the crowded Canto di' Nelli seemed to him precious gems glowing with colour and light : the sky was blue between the walls, roses and carnations were glowing in bunches on the corner of the lane, the bells of the great church were

clanging and vibrating excellently, the whole morning seemed full of light and gladness to him. He would be the owner of the manuscript of 1320 !

To pay for it indeed would cause some difficulty, but that question he put aside for the moment. Paid for it should be, and within the week ; but like a lover, like a child, he did not stay to count the cost which might attend the fulfilment of his infinite desire. As he went through the streets, strangers turned to look at the old man with his bowed shoulders on which his silvery hair floated, for on his face there was a radiance as of earliest youth. The joys of the spirit illumine the countenance as a light shining through a shell.

‘Good-morrow, Ser Checchi,’ said a pleasant voice at his elbow, as Vestuccio, with his good-natured smile and deferential salutation, paused beside him somewhat later by the Croce al Trebbia.

‘Good-day to you,’ answered Ser Checchi dreamily, his thoughts always with the manuscript Dante, and far from the throngs about him.

‘Might I have a word with you, Ser?’ asked the younger man with hesitation.

‘Certainly,’ said the elder, a vague disquietude stirring in him; the smith had said that the dealer had seen the folio.

‘We are near my little place, if you would honour me by stepping in and



sitting down; the sun is very warm to-day,' said Vestuccio.

His little place, where he had lately opened business, was the shop in the Piazza della Madonna degli Aldobrandini; modest and unassuming, with 'Aurelio Vestuccio, Antiquario' painted above its door, and the artistic medley of a bric-à-brac dealer's odds and ends shown in its larger window; bronzes, carvings, jars, vases, marbles, woodwork, mosaics, and brasses, most of them clever imitations of what they pretended to be, filling up the rooms, which opened one out of another. Ser Checchi passed within its doors. He liked Vestuccio, who had such a civil, pleasant, intelligent manner, and who had more than once put in his way rare books which

the dealer had fallen in with, and of which, as he said, he would have known nothing of the value but for the lessons received from the librarian.

‘Walk in here, sir,’ said Vestuccio now, opening an inner door into a small den only big enough to hold a desk and two stools, with some shelves filled by ledgers.

He shut the door, although there was no one in hearing.

The little office looked on a yard in which his workmen were used to pack up sold goods, furbish up old rubbish, fit plain old furniture with metal brass handles and locks, and render more attractive and picturesque all objects which required such embellishment. It was now noonday ; and there was no

one in the yard ; the only living thing there was a gray striped cat, asleep on a rusty and rickety kneeling-chair.

‘You want to speak to me?’ asked Ser Checchi uneasily, his mind ever following the Dante where it was jogging along, wrapped in the flowered print and nursed on the fat woman’s knees.

‘The smith of Giogoli brought me a manuscript,’ began Vestuccio.

‘Ah!’ said Ser Checchi, with a little gasping sigh of inquiry and uneasiness. He understood that the book was going away from him, that some rich purchaser had been found.

‘He told me of your goodness in acquainting him with its date and value,’ continued Vestuccio. ‘Is it really

worth so much? You know, Ser, I am very ignorant of manuscripts and their like.'

'Its worth is incalculable,' said Ser Checchi, with courageous integrity, though the admission tore at his heart-strings; 'that is, if it be sold to foreigners. Our libraries have no money. Did Iorio speak to you of selling it to me?'

'He did,' answered Vestuccio. 'He is grateful, and feels that you have no little right to command its purchase. What would he have known of its very existence even, had it not been for you? I ventured to inquire if you wished to buy it, because I have a client, a German dealer, who would be anxious to get it, before it could be offered to

our own Government or to the foreign libraries. But, of course, if you intend to buy it yourself, your prior claim would never be disputed by me.'

'I wish to buy it; I mean to buy it,' said Ser Checchi, with incautious haste.

Vestuccio's merry blue eyes smiled, as a grown person's eyes may smile at the silliness of a child; but he answered seriously, and with great respect of tone:

'That is enough, sir; for my part, I shall tell the man from Hamburg that the volume is already disposed of, and will never come into the market at all.'

'Yes, yes,' said Ser Checchi hurriedly. 'Quite so. If Iorio will cede it at the

price he would obtain in Italy, I will purchase it.'

'Ready money?' murmured Vestuccio, with a vague apology in his tone for his mention of the two words.

Ser Checchi hesitated. He was the most candid of all men, and transparent as an alabaster vase. He knew that he could not pay ready money for the book; that to pay for it at all would require thought, negotiation, sacrifice, time. He had drooped his head on his chest, his delicate pale hand played nervously with a sheet of blotting-paper on the office desk before him. Vestuccio, to whom all his neighbours' affairs were as well known as the brass nails which he had driven into a leathern chair, or the new gilding with

which he revived the glory of a mediæval nimbus, watched him with a gentle and compassionate amusement. He knew that Ser Checchi could no more put his hand at the moment on a thousand francs than he could have taken hold of the moon or the sun in the heavens.

He saw the trouble and the perplexity of mind which his two words had caused, and he left the old man for a few minutes to his own meditations, while he himself went out into the yard to drive the cat away over the wall. When he came back Ser Checchi was still nervously folding the blotting-paper to and fro, a shadow cast on his mobile features. Ready money! Ready money should and must be found.

‘The truth is, Ser Checchi,’ said the dealer, coming in, and removing the square smoking-cap he wore — ‘the truth is, that this good fellow of Giogoli knows the wish which you have for this volume. It was a thousand pities you let him know it; a thousand pities you did not keep the worth of the manuscript dark——’

‘What! Oh, hush! how can you?’ said the bookseller, lifting his head in pained indignation.

Vestuccio smiled and waved his hand.

‘Well, well, sir, pardon me; I know that honour and generosity rule your life. It was noble, very noble, but you throw pearls before swine, you know. However, what is done is done. This smith knows now; and, having the



knowledge, he will take the money too. We cannot blame him. Of course your conscience ruled you. Mine rules me, and loses me many a hundred-franc note in the year. It is terrible—yes, it is terrible in this knavish world to be an honest man.'

Ser Checchi made an impatient and slightly haughty movement.

'It is an elementary virtue!' he said; with a sarcastic intonation. 'It is known even amongst savages.'

Vestuccio perceived that he had taken a wrong tack; that to congratulate a man of integrity upon his integrity is an affront not easily condoned.

Ser Checchi rose and took his hat.

'I thought you said that you had

business with me. I see I mistook. Good-day, Vestuccio.'

'Stay a moment, sir,' said the dealer obsequiously. 'Pray do not go in anger. I am a blunt, unpolished fellow, but my heart is sound—my heart is sound. The truth is, sir, knowing how you wished for this Dante folio, I ventured to hope that, if you cannot find it quite convenient to pay for it down on the nail, you would let me have the pleasure of doing so for you, and you could then repay me when you pleased at your leisure. I owe you much, Ser Checchi; many a rare bit of knowledge and many a date and secret of art have I, a poor, ignorant, common fellow, learned from you and been your debtor for, in my commerce.'

The elder man was silent. A faint flush came on his cheeks and forehead : the proud and delicate spirit in him winced and shrank at the idea that his necessities, however slight, were known to others.

‘ You mean well, and I thank you, my good Aurelio,’ he said a little distantly. ‘ But I have not asked your help.’

‘ Help ! I would never give it such a name,’ cried Vestuccio. ‘ It would be a favour which you would do me, for I owe you much, and though I am a rough man, I am not a thankless one. I know how you wish for this old book, which is, by all right of treasure-trove, yours, and the fellow who owns it has placed the sale of it in my hands. I

suppose you are sure of its authenticity?’

Ser Checchi smiled with the pity of culture for ignorance.

‘It is a Codex which the poet himself may have had written!’

‘Well, well, sir; I take your word for it, you are a learned man,’ said Vestuccio, who desired to depreciate or appear sceptical of its value.

With that he lifted the lid of the desk, and took out, from the hollow underneath, the Dante, and with a careless touch opened it, and turned the yellow parchment pages, whilst the sunlight slanting in from the window shone on the regular lines of its black-letter columns.

Ser. Checchi thrilled from head to

foot like a man who beholds a beloved mistress.

‘Iorio has sold it to you!’ he exclaimed involuntarily. ‘He promised me—he promised me—the preference.’

Vestuccio smiled.

‘The good fellow has a wife; and the gray mare is the better horse. He left it with me because he wished you to have it. The woman would have allowed him no peace if it had remained with them.’

Ser Checchi leaned over the desk, touching the manuscript caressingly with his long slender fingers; the colour came and went on his face; he felt as if he had been degraded and soiled by Vestuccio’s praise of his action and by his own sense of how sharp a struggle it had cost him. And the sight of the

Dante on the dealer's desk brought home to him the sense of how certainly, if it did not become his own then and there, it would soon pass forever out of his vision and grasp.

Vestuccio watched him smilingly—an indulgent smile as of a man looking down on a whimsical and half-witted child ; after a pause he said gently :

‘ See now, Ser Checchi, your heart is set on this thing, and for sure, as I say, it is yours already by all the right of treasure-trove. I will buy it of the smith, and you shall buy it of me at your perfect convenience. You will sign me a little paper, just for form's sake, to set your mind at ease because you are so proud and solitary ; and you can take the Dante home with you and put it under

your pillow if you like to-night, if it will make you sleep the better. Leave me to deal with Iorio. I know those bumpkins ; they are sharp as needles, though they look such simple souls. Take the Codex, as you call it, sir ; you and I shall never quarrel.'

'No, no ; I could not be so deeply beholden to you or to anyone,' said Ser Checchi, as he closed the volume and laid it inside the desk. 'You mean well, that I am sure, but I should not be at peace a moment if I took it on those terms. I do not do business so.'

'Then the book must go to the Hamburg people,' said Vestuccio, with a sigh, as he turned the key on his safe. 'Think twice of what I have said, sir ; it is no obligation : you will just sign to

pay me at three months, six, twelve—at any date you please—and the Dante will belong to you, the one man in Europe who is worthy of it!’

‘But why should you do this service to me?’ asked Ser Checchi, with a flash of insight lightening the placid, even tenor of his trust in human nature.

‘It is no service,’ said Vestuccio, ‘and, to prevent your feeling that it is one, we will put it in as regular a business form as you may please that it shall take. I wish you to have the book, sir : first of all because justice is justice, and should be done when it can ; and secondly because you have been a good friend to me, and I am glad if I can do you ever so slight a benefit. Take the volume home with you, honoured sir,



and we will write out the memorandum some other day.'

Ser Checchi knew the ways of commerce, although so little trade came nigh his tower, and he ought to have remembered what had been his experiences all his life, that he who leaves a signature behind him gives the costliest of hostages to fortune.

But the manuscript folio allured him irresistibly ; even shut away beneath the lid of the desk, like a dead friend beneath a coffin lid, it seemed to draw him towards it with a subtle and magnetic power, and when he left the shop of Aurelio Vestuccio that day, he carried the Codex of the 'Commedia' with him; and in the desk, in its stead, was lying a small oblong piece of stamped paper

bearing his clear, fine handwriting upon it, and at which Vestuccio looked with a satisfied smile.

‘Chi va piano va sano,’ murmured that shrewd tradesman to himself; heaven had sent fools into the world to be the support of clever men, as little fish are made to be the food of big ones.

He watched the figure of Ser Checchi passing through the artistic lumber of his yard with benevolent compassion, and saw the gates close on him with that triumphant sense of cruel success which moves the trapper in the woods when he sees the gentle beast for whom the trap is set walk guilelessly within its meshes.

And he turned his admirable mind on

the morrow to the successful and secret persuasion of the smith of Giogoli that there had been a mistake about the value of the old vellum book ; but that nothing must be said about that to Ser Checchi, whose brain was softening and growing childish.

## CHAPTER V.

SER CHECCHI displayed the Codex to his daughter with pride and joy, and found in her all the sympathy with his pleasure which a cultured intelligence and a warm heart could give. But he offered no explanation of how it had come into his possession, beyond saying that he had discovered it amongst some musty and worthless volumes, which Iorio the blacksmith had turned out of an old chest; and Beldia, who was but sixteen at that time, was too respectful

to ask more than he chose to explain, and too loyal to inquire from others any details which he did not himself proffer to her. She was not curious; and she was even then so accustomed to have entire liberty in all household matters, but to be wholly excluded from the affairs of her father's business, that it never seemed to her rather odd or ominous that the cost of the early Dante was concealed from her.

Vestuccio had his own reasons for not speaking of the matter; and Iorio had been so rated by his wife for not waiting for some princely purchaser, that the subject was a sore one to him. But it was the beginning of serious financial transactions between Ser Checchi and the dealer in the

Piazza della Madonna ; and sometimes when he unlocked the drawer in which the precious volume lay, even though he loved it so dearly, the elder man almost found it in his soul to wish that he had never stopped for that fatal draught of watered wine on the hillside of Giogoli. There were moments of exquisite happiness, when he displayed his treasure to scholars by whom it could be appreciated, and it was a source of profound joy to him always to have a contemporary Dante Codex for his very own ; but at times he realized that he had entered into bondage through and for it.

To get money by merely writing your name is so easy that its ease has been the ruin of tens of thousands ; and

Vestuccio beyond all others knew how to render it so easy, that a man of absent mind, of scholarly extravagance, and of dreamful indolence, like Ser Checchi, never perceived what it might ultimately cost him to possess himself of monastic manuscripts and precious palimpsests by the mere stroke of a pen in his fine, small, clear, clerkly handwriting.

He did not even know how many times he had written 'Francesco Ardiglione' upon those stamped sheets of paper, which the dealer put away with as apparent a carelessness as though he were merely going to light his pipe with them.

The bibliophile, like the artist, and the poet, and the lover, will do anything wise or unwise, good or bad, to

reach the object of his desires. Sometimes Beldia thought with a pang of what a source of happiness his literary passion would have been to him had he been a rich man. Alas! rich men usually look upon their libraries as mere show places to assist their pomp, or as mere inherited wealth, to be quickly sent to the hammer. Perception is so seldom united with possessions; the wisdom of the soul is so rarely given with the power of the purse!

Beldia was the most dutiful of daughters; and the infinite respect which she entertained for him never permitted her to blame what he did, even in her own thoughts; but he did not care all the same to meet the



questioning gravity of her eyes when he had been making unwise purchases, so that little by little he had grown to conceal from her any unusually costly book or manuscript, and the various straits to which he was sometimes put to pay for them. For Ser Checchi would no more have bought a book on credit than a fond mother would get into debt for her child's christening robe. It would have been difficult to do so, for most rare volumes were found at auction rooms, or in antiquaries' shops, or in remote presbyteries and church-closets, where immediate payment was the *sine qua non* of purchase. But when he could have bought on credit he would not ; credit would have seemed to him to soil the pure grave

faces of the beloved books and manuscripts, which he would touch with such a reverent, caressing gesture of the hand, as you will see in a sculptor when he passes his fingers softly down some marble curve of arm or hip or breast.

‘It will sell for ten times its value, my dear,’ he would invariably say when she observed it; but as buyers of such costly goods hardly ever came to the tower, and as, whenever they did so, he invariably shrank from losing his favourite volumes, and to that end either hid them, or named some preposterous and prohibitive price, she knew by experience that what their worth would or would not realize mattered very little to her father,

except in so far as his pride as a bibliophile was flattered by the possession.

‘If he were a rich man collecting a library to enjoy it, there could be no healthier or happier pursuit,’ she thought; ‘but when it is his trade, when he should only buy and sell, and do both wisely, his adoration of his books is fatal.’

All the filial veneration of her soul could not blind her clear and keen intelligence to the fact that the commerce of books, as Ser Checchi conducted it, could only be more ruinous than to pursue no trade at all.

‘He is as dilettante as if he were a duke!’ said Cirillo angrily once. He, for his part, would have made a bonfire

of all the books with the utmost pleasure.

Beldia would not admit the truth of it, but in her heart she felt that it was only too true. All the delicate research, the fastidious judgment, and the severe taste of her father would have made the joy and the renown of an amateur collector, but in a librarian were but so many costly impediments. Ser Checchi knew this himself, and it made his conscience twinge and tremble at times ; but he thrust the consciousness aside. He was ruled by his master passion, and when he saw an old copy, of undoubted age and value, or any manuscript of some great dead hand, his whole gentle and unassuming person was transformed ; he became indifferent to everything, except

the means by which he might become the owner of such a treasure, and he had even developed a clever and ingenious, though childlike, cunning, in concealing the temptations of this sort which he met with in his daily saunterings through the street. Once he had discovered several pages of autograph verse of Politziano's in a chandler's shop, enwrapping some butter, and this discovery had served him for excuse and warrant ever since. True, his honesty had compelled him to acquaint the buttermilk man with the value of his wrapping-paper before offering money for it, but the buttermilk man had been incredulous, and had said with a pitying, benignant smile that it was only robaccia (rubbish), so that he had taken his Politziano

home for the price of the butter itself, and this lucky chance had served as an example, and as an incentive to purchases, ever since. Many things, however, cost him much more than a pound of butter; and for some of his manuscripts and folios he had paid as heavily as though he had been a curator for the Luxembourg or for the Bodleian.

‘They will be a fine dower for Beldia,’ he told his conscience. But at that thought his heart contracted and his bowels yearned; for to become a dower for her they would have, of necessity, to be sold. And the thought of selling them was torture to him. He would have liked to think that his coffin would be filled with them, and

that he would lie in his tomb with his folios on his breast, as knights have their shields on theirs.

From the time of the purchase of the Dante, Vestuccio had become the chief adviser and assistant in financial matters of the librarian, by whom money matters had always been esteemed the most vulgar and debasing of all mundane concerns.

Ser Checchi, though too trustful and compliant, was no fool, however, and at times there came over him with uneasiness the perception that he was trusting too much and leaving too much to his good friend of the Piazza della Madonna. Nor did he desire that his daughter should know how thoroughly Vestuccio had ingratiated himself with

him, and wound himself into his confidence.

Ser Checchi, like all scholars and people who love impersonal meditation, was reluctant to be roused out of his studies and pursuits, and forced into contact with the vulgar and commonplace interests of daily and practical life. The eminently practical mind of Vestuccio quickly found out this tendency, and knew how to turn it and humour it to serve his own purpose. While the old philosopher floated in an empyrean of fine thought, or pursued some philological or historical question, which for him seemed of as vast import as the conquest of Asia seemed to Alexander, he was very glad to find a quick-witted, pleasant-tempered, and unobtrusive per-



son, who spared him much trouble and attended to many things in his name.

‘The Signorina Beldia does not like me, though she is so good to my little one,’ said Vestuccio regretfully more than once.

And Ser Checchi answered more than once :

‘Tut, tut ! what does a young woman’s fancy matter, my good fellow, to you ? My daughter is always very slow to give her liking, except to animals and children.’

‘If she does not approve of men, who shall say that she has not right on her side ?’ answered the dealer with his good-humoured smile, and added more seriously : ‘The signorina is certainly fitter for babes and saints than for our

clumsy and rough company. They all call her Madonna Beldia, and for certain such a woman as she is puts most of us to shame.'

Being shrewd and full of tact, he did not try to force his good qualities on her attention, but contented himself with greeting her respectfully whenever he met her, and kept carefully away from her knowledge the transactions which he and her father had together. Something of them, however, she dimly suspected, and the mere suspicion made her uneasy. Aurelio Vestuccio had a good name on the Piazza, and had a pleasant countenance and manner; but Folko growled when he approached, and Folko's mistress felt the same instinct of distrust and apprehension as

the dog. She liked his little girls, nevertheless, and the children were never so happy as when they could climb the steep stone stair of the tower, and mount the ladder which led on to the roof amongst the flowering plants and the pigeons.

They were pretty little girls, with long fair hair and dancing blue eyes, like what their father's had been when he had sold his shells and seaweed at their age; they were known as Gemma and Dina, and they were often seen tying up the pinks, drying the rose-leaves for pot-pourri, feeding the birds, or otherwise aiding, or imagining that they aided, Ser Checchi's daughter. Every Christmas their father sent them with a bouquet and some dried fruit to

her, and every Easter they brought her a basket of eggs and lemons in acknowledgment of, and return for, the many kindnesses she showed to them, and the courage with which she had nursed them in their sickness.

‘Always be pretty behaved, my treasures,’ said Vestuccio to them.

Pretty behaviour had stood himself in such good stead, and had paid him a hundred per cent. on it. Vestuccio could never understand why people were rough and rude, and coarse and repellent, and told the truth and swore at their neighbours. It was so much simpler and nicer to behave well, and speak as if the world were a pot of cream and a bowl of sugar.

You could put what poison you liked

in the cream; and you could disguise so many things with the sugar.

Beldia was used to seeing Vestuccio come and go about her father's chambers. She gave no thought to his frequent visits, but she did not like him any better than she liked the advocate Querci. She knew, however, that her father esteemed him and employed him, and therefore she endeavoured to restrain her own prejudices, and at the end of each year made pretty little presents for his children, of whom he had many, as behoved a good citizen.

‘The signorina is an angel,’ said Vestuccio more than once, and said so with genuine tears in his eyes when she saved the life of his eldest little girl by her judicious and courageous nursing

during diphtheria, when the child's mother was helpless and useless from fright, and lay on the floor in hysterics all day long.

But he did not for that reason cease to accumulate Ser Checchi's signatures within his desk.

He would have said that the one thing had nothing to do with the other. Feelings and accounts are as far apart from each other as the rose in your button-hole from the boots on your feet.

He one day gave orders to his foreman never to sell anything to a certain person; the certain person could not pay. The foreman, foolish and new to the business, bluntly told the impecunious client that it was of no use to come to the shop; he would be given

nothing. Vestuccio, on learning this coarse and unpardonable blunder, was as violently angry as so good-tempered a man could be.

‘This is how you should get rid of people without offending them,’ he said to the foreman, and planted a tall, high-backed chair in the middle of the warehouse, and bowed to it with many smiles, softly rubbing his hands together. ‘Represent to yourself that this chair is a well-born, well-bred person, without credit, whom we know well—and know will never pay in twenty years’ time, and has nothing to render it worth our having the law upon him. Now behold me receive him when he wishes to purchase.’

And he walked in front of the chair,

courteously bending his supple backbone.

‘Most illustrious Sir Chair,’ he said unctuously, ‘my very soul is rent, my pain is inexpressible, but, alas! that article which you desire is sold already; and this, and this, and this also—all, alas! that you see around you. I will telegraph to the purchaser to try and obtain a release of these objects for your most eminent self; for there is no monarch or minister in Europe whom I would serve with such joy as I would serve you. Your taste is so perfect. You appreciate so exquisitely. It is delightful to feel that a beautiful object passes to your hands. I will telegraph instantly, but if the buyer will not release them, alas! what can I do? I



would lose twenty per cent. to know the joy of selling to you, dear Sir Chair, but they are already promised, more than promised—sold! And, alas! one's commercial word is one's bond!

Then he rubbed his hands and made three graceful bows, and walked backwards from the chair, smiling and sighing.

‘There, idiot!’ he said, turning to the foreman with a frown, ‘that is how you should rid yourself of a bad customer without making an enemy of him. You will never give him a centime's worth, but he will believe that you would trust him with millions. Never make a foe, even of an insolvent debtor!’

The foreman, a stupid young man, unworthy of the school in which it

was happiness to dwell, shrugged his shoulders.

‘Life is too short for all that farce,’ he said sheepishly, replacing the high-backed chair amongst its fellows.

His master eyed him with compassionate contempt.

‘Life is long, my friend,’ he answered, ‘to those who know how to play the farce—long and sweet. Sweet!’ he repeated, smacking his lips with unction. ‘And, besides, one should never give pain unnecessarily—not even to a debtor who cannot pay.’

The foreman looked at his employer and grinned: the grin was disrespectful, but Aurelio Vestuccio did not resent it. He smiled broadly and brightly himself, the same smile with which—when

a little lad on the seashore—he had sold shells which were cracked and rotting star-fish.

Life was sweet to him, whatever it might be to his clients and customers, and everything in it was sweet to him, from that straight, tall, ebony chair which he had had made a few hours before—with 1547 carved on its back, and the worm-holes drilled along its legs—to the round sums lent out at compound interest, which multiplied themselves like ants and rabbits.

Any bystander overhearing him talk of Ser Checchi, as they sat at a little round marble table in some coffee-house, would have heard only such tender and reverent praises, such fine phrases of respect and esteem, as would have

warmed his heart to hear; he only sighed over the old librarian's too credulous virtue.

‘Business cannot be done as our dear Ser Checchi does it,’ he observed to Pampilio Querci one day when they met at the *Birraria Cornelio*.

‘He believes everyone is as pure of mouth and of hand as himself,’ answered the young lawyer.

‘He is as trustful as a lamb,’ said the dealer.

‘He is a saint and a sage, and thinks men's breasts are made of glass,’ said the man of law.

‘His own is so,’ replied the other, and added warmly and solemnly as he drained his glass, ‘Woe be to those who wrong him!’

‘Woe be to them indeed!’ said the lawyer, finishing his vermuth.

So they spoke together, understanding one another.

Rude, rough, Northern men would have said bluntly to each other :

‘This client is a goose—let us pluck him.’

Vestuccio and Querci wrapped up the same meaning in admirable and admiring sentences, which deceived no one, indeed, but soothed and pleased themselves, and preserved their self-respect in their own sight and that of each other.

Vestuccio and Querci never trusted each other an inch, and they always kept up an elaborate comedy for each other’s benefit. To each of them the world was a stage, on which, as on the

stage of the Greeks, the masks and the stilts mattered more than the words. Each of these worthies knew that he did not for a moment deceive the other; yet to play the comedy pleased both, gratified their consciousness of wit and wisdom, and gave the agreeable sense of security which is given by a domino and mask.

Cicero's countrymen have still the same sense of propriety and politeness which characterized his gentle and polished utterance of *vixerunt* when his enemies lay dying with throats bleeding like slaughtered pigs.

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